



Waiting for Balance: A Review of *Waiting for Superman* Directed by Davis Guggenheim

Paramount Vantage and Participant Media, 2010. Approximately 90 minutes.

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Introduction

Waiting for Superman is the latest documentary by the Academy Award winning director Davis Guggenheim. Guggenheim also directed *An Inconvenient Truth*, the Al Gore documentary about climate change and global warming. What made *An Inconvenient Truth* such a masterwork was that it presented stark and incontrovertible information about the destruction of our environment and further challenged the viewers to *do something* about it.

Waiting for Superman follows a similar formula. It presents the viewer with an incredible amount of troubling information about our public schools and models of seemingly progressive advocates for change. The data represented is also properly cited on-screen, differentiating it from personal polemics like Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9-11*. It concludes with a challenge to act for the best interests of our nation's youths; the end credits include a web site where viewers can go for ideas. That makes it difficult to speak negatively about the film, but upon a closer analysis we find that most of the information presented in the film is over-generalized and highly debatable. The problem with the film, ultimately, is that it is true and false, comprehensive and incomplete.

Framing the Film

The film begins with Geoffrey Canada, a dynamic educator and social activist who, as founder and Chief Executive Officer of the Harlem Children's Zone, has created significant success for the community. Canada, who grew up in a low-income neighborhood, takes us back to his childhood and recounts a story about his mother telling him that Superman was not real. Canada, ever so eloquently, expressed a profound sadness about this stark dose of reality. As a child his tears were not about the realization that his favorite superhero was not real, but that there was no longer a single person or entity that could come *save* him and his community. As he states in the film, "... there was no one with enough power coming to save us."

To follow-up this recount, Guggenheim in voice-over introduces the purpose of this film and makes an obvious yet profound statement. "No matter who you are or what neighborhood you live in, each morning you make a leap of faith, believing in our schools." He then announces that he must choose against his value of public education and send his young child to a private school. Guggenheim establishes a bleak image of American public education as being insufficient for most families.

The film then cuts to "regular families" who are struggling to find the best educational opportunities for their children. Most of these parents live in struggling, low-income neighborhoods and Guggenheim shows us that their children are clearly intelligent and capable of learning. However, their children are attending poorly performing schools that will greatly diminish their

chances of success the longer they attend. For example, there is the story of Maria who is trying to find the best option for her son Francisco. He attends the third largest overcrowded school in the Bronx. We meet Gloria, who took in her grandson Anthony after his father died from drug related causes. We also meet Nakia, whose makes great sacrifices to send her daughter Bianca to a private school in Harlem. Later in the film Bianca is unable to attend her graduation because Nakia cannot pay that month's tuition.

Most of the "characters" in the film convey truly heart-wrenching stories and these stories establish a sense of urgency and outrage that begs a key question: How can this happen in a country like the United States, the wealthiest nation on the planet? Canada comes back into focus to point out an important and humane idea, "Kids look at the world and make predictions... They know they are getting the short end of the stick and they don't know why."

The text unfolds like a brilliantly written expose as it oscillates between explorations of the concerns and struggles of these families and explanations of the complicated institution of education. It must be remembered that Guggenheim has a key challenge all documentarians have: making a film that is both informative and entertaining. As such, the human-interest stories develop to bolster the social and political urgency of the information which the layperson (film-goer) may be unaware. In that sense the film deserves its acclaim. There are moments of humor and wit balanced with disgust and pity. But, like all mediated texts, Guggenheim manipulates and edits relevant information and counterarguments that could confound his thesis.

Failure in the Age of No Child Left Behind and the Keeping up with the Joneses

The first startling fact presented is that although per-pupil spending has increased dramatically over the past thirty years, standardized test scores have flat-lined. The notion that education professionals have not been doing anything about this is juxtaposed to the establishment of public education as a national and presidential priority. A montage of presidential statements about the importance of education ensues, from President Carter to President Obama. This introduces the historic No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB).

In order to discuss NCLB, Guggenheim details the lack of proficiency around the country, utilizing beautiful graphics and animation that represent the percentage of students falling down a hole of under-performance on state assessments. It is a shocking thing to see and a brilliant representation to be sure. However, the film does not utilize any talking heads that seriously criticize *NCLB*; the problems are only hinted at. Why this is such an egregious omission is that although few would argue against accountability, the demands of NCLB were wholly insufficient and misguided. As Darling-Hammond (2007) pointed out:

Critics claim that the law's focus on complicated tallies of multiple-choice-test scores has dumbed down the curriculum, fostered a "drill and kill" approach to teaching, mistakenly labeled successful schools as failing, driven teachers and middle-class students out of public schools and harmed special education students and English-language learners through inappropriate assessments and efforts to push out low-scoring students in order to boost scores (Paragraph 6).

In effect, metaphorically, Guggenheim judges the quality of players in the game on a field that is fundamentally flawed. He and the talking heads do not take the time to engage viewers in an equally powerful analysis of how the policies and demands of NCLB have significantly curtailed what the schools and districts, largely urban districts, can do. Instead, the focus of criticism is placed squarely on teachers and teachers' unions, as will be discussed momentarily.

Guggenheim also raises the issue of the United States' students ranking twenty-second on international assessments. The significant problem here is that Guggenheim provides no counter-argument to these data while holding them up as primary indicators of failure. He does not mention that these comparisons are deeply flawed. Just as a matter of numbers (not to mention looking at the graphic presented in the film), the United States is not *significantly* behind other countries. But what is more important is that the film does not point out that these comparisons are like comparing apples and oranges. International systems like Finland, which is highlighted in the film, are unlike the United States in that they have a much more robust social service system and the values and dispositions of the countries are much different.

Flinders (2009) points out that variations in international standardized test scores depend on “deeply engrained cultural values and traditions that do not easily transfer from one country to another...” and “... some educational practices in higher ranking nations we might judge to be detrimental regardless of their promise to increase test scores” (p. 3). Furthermore, the response of many schools to the demand of high stakes testing have been a narrowing of the curriculum and that has resulted in higher test scores but lowered overall learning (Carnoy, 2003; McNeil, 2004). In short, context, locally or globally, is an important point, and even though we may want to be like the Joneses we may not like what the Joneses do to be who they are.

What is key to this conversation about test scores is that most educators strongly feel that reliance on high-stakes standardized tests is an insufficient indicator of success. As a matter of fact, when the curriculum has been narrowed to the point of teaching to the test, the only true learning being assessed is whether or not a student knows how to take that specific test. True measures of learning and intelligence (like critical thinking, application of knowledge, manipulation of one's environment, or being able to identify problems in one's community and creating self-generated strategies for change) are absent for the text. Ultimately, reliance on standardized tests do not necessarily tell us whether or not students in low-performing schools are in fact ready to participate and compete for jobs in the twenty-first century economy or participate in making democratic decisions.

Waiting for Super(wo)man at Failure Ground Zero

The focus of the film turns to Washington D.C., where, at the time of the making of the film, reading proficiency was roughly twelve percent. Canada suggests that there is something wrong with the system and points out, again, that children do not see this phenomenon as a systemic failure but a personal one. As he says, “A kid blames himself and thinks, ‘I’m going nowhere.’” This somber assessment is further problematized by the work of Robert Balfanz, who coined the term “dropout factories” and places the number of perpetually failing schools at roughly 2000 nationwide. Historically, as the film purports, failing schools have been blamed on failing neighborhoods, but recently the shift in perspective is that failing schools are *creating* failing neighborhoods. The film does a surgical job of showing how the dropout problem damages communities. For example, prisons spend roughly \$33,000 per prisoner per year. Comparatively it cost roughly \$8,300 per student per year. Money for prisons goes only one way—with a mass of people who are literally not contributing to society—via tax dollars and human capital.

What is missing here is a sense of scale. Although no one can scoff at 2000 “dropout factories,” the film is an indictment of public education *as a whole*. Therefore it is somewhat disingenuous to not mention that there are 2000 “dropout factories” out of 98,916 total schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Granted, to provide this balanced reporting could potentially take away the urgency of Guggenheim's argument because the film would no longer

be about *our* schools but *their* schools. That sense of social and community responsibility for the education of all our children is a much more difficult argument to make.

Since ground zero for failure in the film is Washington D.C. public schools, Guggenheim turns his attention to Michelle Rhee. Rhee is the seventh superintendent for Washington D.C. public schools in ten years, and she has been featured in national media outlets like *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and countless talk radio programs as the brave new face of pragmatic educational reform. Rhee's resume' is only hinted at, but it is pointed out that she only taught for three years, does not have a doctorate in education, and has no previous experience administrating a large district. Critically this begs the question of why she was hired in the first place; however, the clear suggestion is that to really foment change, an outsider not entrenched in the system must take the reins.

Her moves to decrease the bureaucracy, make a deal with the teacher's union to do away with tenure by offering greatly increased salaries, and shutting down a significant number of failing schools (i.e. neighborhood schools) were all met with great resistance. But, as the film points out, many of her ideas apparently worked because test scores began to turn around.

What is problematic here is that Rhee and her methods were not really questioned. The film argues that administrators, teachers, and parents in Washington D.C. did not appreciate Rhee's ideas and policy moves because they were opposed to the accommodations they had to make. However, there are other ways of looking at her tenure. Rachel Levy, a graduate of Washington D.C. public schools and a former teacher for the district expresses sharp criticism of Rhee:

Rhee's ideas about how to fix the ailing school system were largely misinformed, and it's no wonder: She knew little about instruction, curriculum, management, fiscal matters, and community relations. She was, to be sure, abrasive... But as education historian Diane Ravitch has said, "It's difficult to win a war when you're firing on your own troops" (Strauss, 2010, paragraph 2).

Rhee's essential problem is that she was a slash and burn administrator who did not build coalitions and consensus. The film shows images of her at meetings looking haggard and dejected as teachers and parents harangue her about her policy moves. Guggenheim constructs her as a road weary warrior in a Sisyphean fight against the masses that are desperately holding onto a destructive status quo. The reality is that Washington D.C. public schools have been in a morass for many years and all stakeholders wanted change. But just because change is desired does not necessarily mean change for anything sans careful thought as to its implications.

Again, the text of the film holds up an increase in test scores as the pudding proof that Rhee is a champion. It is true that test scores on the National Education Assessment Program (NAEP) did rise (Washington Post, 2010), but locally student test scores for elementary, middle, and secondary schools only temporarily rose and have since once again begun to fall. Commenting on the local assessment for regular schools, the District of Columbia Comprehensive Assessment System, Mark Lerner (2010), DC Charter Schools Examiner, says, "For the traditional elementary schools reading proficiency dropped over 4 points from the previous year to 44.4 percent. Math proficiency went down almost 5 points to 43.4 percent" (paragraph 1). In essence, as the saying goes, winning a few battles does not necessarily mean we won the war.

The March of the Scapegoats

The real issue is the quality of instruction. As pointed out in the film, a "bad" teacher only covers 50 percent of the curriculum while a "good" one covers about 150 percent. However, that

is the only mention of curriculum in the entire film! So the focus of the film has nothing to do with what American students are actually learning but essentially whether they pass arbitrary standardized tests and the quality of teachers.

Canada, as well as Howard Fuller, the former superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools, say that you cannot do anything truly progressive until teachers' unions are dealt with. To highlight this, the film exposes institutional phenomena like the "dance of the lemons," wherein bad teachers are let go by one school at the end of the year, but since union contracts says they cannot be fired, schools swaps bad teachers, hoping they find one that can fit.

The most egregious example of teacher protection is New York City Public School's Rubber Room, where teachers who have been removed from their classrooms for a host of issues wait out their due process. This costs roughly 100 million dollars a year. As the film points out, of 876 districts in Illinois 61 attempted to fire a teacher, and only one was successful. Nationally, only one in 2,500 poorly performing teachers are fired.

In a nod to fairness, the film provides a brief point about the historic need for teachers' unions, but quickly undercuts this by declaring them as obstructionist. The only representative of teachers' unions in the film is Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers. However, Guggenheim does not feature Ms. Weingarten as a talking head, for whatever reason. All of her comments are taken from previously recorded interviews or speeches and are out of context. As such, she does not have the privilege of explaining the union perspective.

The need for unions and explicit union contracts/tenure continues to be important, especially since states like Kansas, Nebraska, Alabama, and others consistently argue about whether or not to teach controversial yet relevant material like evolution, sex education, queer literature, and other issues. True, no one wants bad teachers, including teachers' unions, but giving administrators and local communities the ability to fire teachers simply because of cultural or value differences can certainly be detrimental to both student learning and the growth of children. Also, teaching can be an all-encompassing job and union contracts do establish necessary limitation. (I must note here that maneuvering around union contracts can be difficult and some contracts are in fact obstructive to fair and good educational reforms, but that is not necessarily status quo).

But what struck this reviewer as most troubling is that the film has a "why don't they just..." tone. If we just got better, more compliant teachers then everything would be better. Maybe, but the problem is that Guggenheim does not approach how difficult it really is to train and retain highly effective teachers. Nor does the film point out the many supports new teachers need for success. We know that many teachers leave the profession within the first five years. That is not for vain reasons; it is a difficult job to educate young people! Teachers' unions are in place to protect teachers and to remind administrators and others that it is difficult to induct and mentor teachers: teachers need legal protections and professional support.

After the film's release Weingarten was featured on *Meet the Press* pointing out that since it is difficult to learn to be a good teacher, unions try to make sure assessments of teachers are fair and helpful, not singularly punitive. For example, in furthering the argument of teachers as obstructionist the film strikes a tone of disbelief that D.C. teachers would be so staunchly against Rhee's proposal of trading tenure for increased salaries and renewable contracts. However, teachers had more of a problem with the evaluation and assessment system that was being proposed rather than the idea of trading away tenure protections (Strauss, 2010).

Additionally, the film pays no attention to the fact that classrooms today are filled with students of many cultures, perspectives, abilities, values, languages, etc. The film almost completely removes the labyrinthine demands of a multicultural society as a key factor in the ability to be a

highly effective educator. Although teacher education is fundamentally important, most programs provide limited classroom experiences, and twelve to fifteen week student teaching placements is a minimal amount of time to really learn the job. Also, newer teachers feel unprepared to deal with the multicultural demands of the classroom and are not well prepared to deal with the real problems that exist in low-income districts.

An Incomplete Review

This review only engaged the larger, more controversial issues represented in the film. At ninety minutes in length *Waiting for Superman* provides a fairly comprehensive overview of the key issues facing public education, and challenges viewers to become involved in the reform of our schools. The film's last thirty minutes shifts to a bird's eye overview of successful charter schools that the featured families are trying to get their children into through a lottery system; it only vaguely hints at the existence of data showing that only one in five charter schools are in fact successful. In these last minutes, the film also very briefly touches on the problem of tracking. The final fifteen minutes pushes the viewer to the edge of our seats as we wait in rapt anticipation for lottery results for charter school entrance...culminating with startling conclusions.

In his discourse, Guggenheim lays the blame for the perceived failure of our public schools directly at the feet of teachers and teachers' unions. Although at each step of his criticism he briefly explains why institutional mechanisms like unions and tenure exist, he does much more damage in his overt criticism about what they have become; and, in the end, provides a rather incomplete picture for the viewer. The stark tragedy is that the film falls to political posturing rather than a clear-eyed analysis of issues and ideas necessary for change.

Geoffrey Canada's work in Harlem is not just about schools. He is helping to change *communities*. As Anyon (1997) points out, true educational reform and student success cannot happen unless we, as a nation, address the social, political, and economic contexts that impede progress for schools. Guggenheim's film does not come close to challenging that fact. As such, this film is highly engaging and is great as an introduction to the problems of American public education, but it will require much discussion and challenge in order to be a useful tool for teacher education and education in general.

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