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Alice E. Ginsberg

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ARTICLE

Waiting for Superman: He's "adequate" and near proficient!

Dr. Alice E. Ginsberg

Superman: Easy, miss. I've got you.Lois Lane: You - you've got me? Who's got you?*(Superman, 1978)*

In the second week of its national release, the documentary film *Waiting for Superman*-- about America's so-called "failing" public school system-- jumped from number 194 in gross receipts to number 20 (*Entertainment Weekly*, 2010). It couldn't have hurt that the film was featured as a cover story by Amanda Ripley (2010) in *Time* magazine only a few weeks earlier, with the provocative tag line: "Can a movie change education?" (Ripley, 2010). Or for that matter, that the film was lauded on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (2010), during the course of which Oprah, so moved by the movie, pledged to give \$6,000,000 (via her Angel Network) to charter schools across the country.

In Ripley's article in *Time* (2010), the documentary is described as "not just a movie, but a dispatch from a *revolution*" (p. 32; emphasis mine). According to Ripley, the film succeeds because it "lays out solutions, something no one could credibly attempt to do until very recently" (p. 32). Crediting the "blunt instruments" of *No Child Left Behind* (2002) -- yearly mandatory standardized testing in math and reading -- Ripley asserts that we can now "figure out which schools are working and which are not" (p. 34). Ripley boldly adds that this kind of "hard information" has been "for all of history a matter of conjecture and hearsay" (p. 35). Until now, that is.

The idea that hundreds of years of research on, and innovations in, American public schools can so be easily reduced to "conjecture and hearsay" is but one of many disturbing facts about how this film has been interpreted and received by the media and a large portion of the American public. Can we so easily dismiss the deeply moving and compelling work of education historian Jonathan Kozol, who is most famous for his book *Savage Inequalities* (1991) about glaring inequities in school funding and civil rights? Or that of *Coalition of Essential Schools* founder Ted Sizer, one of the visionary leaders of the small-schools movement who sought to give children a more personalized stake in their education? What about the extensive research on multiple intelligences conducted by Harvard University's Howard Gardner, author of *Frames of Mind* (2006), which has led so many educators to see children as complex individuals who respond to different stimuli?

What about the philosophy of prolific progressive reformers John Dewey and Paulo Freire, who have long argued that all teaching and learning are relational, mutual and on-going processes that become truly meaningful only when connected to real-world problems and social action?

Then there are the exemplary practices in school reform generated and documented by recent visionaries such as Maxine Greene, Michelle Fine, Lisa Delpit, Pedro Noguera, Deborah Meier, Sonia Neito, James Banks, Linda Darling-Hammond, Gloria Ladson-Billings....the full list cannot be contained herein. To call this huge and diverse body of educational research and ideas "conjecture and hearsay" is a barely disguised political tactic. But then again, this film is, according to Ripley, not just a film, it is a "*revolution*."

In many ways the film is aptly titled: Superman represents an unstoppable force, a power so great that practically nothing or no one can get in his way. Perhaps most importantly, however, Superman's inherent goodness is always left unquestioned, in contrast to the evil villains that he must continually protect us against. Whether or not Superman himself ever actually shows up is beside the point; the larger assumption is that if we can't improve our schools through visionary leadership, community involvement, innovative ideas, or equitable funding, we can certainly do it through *brute force*.

And as most comic-book lovers can tell you, brute force usually includes an implicit or explicit threat. This is glaringly obvious in education reporter Jay Matthews' contribution to the film's companion/participant guide, also called *Waiting for Superman* (Weber, 2010). In his chapter, titled "What *Really* Makes a Super School," Matthews talks at length about his admiration for the unconventional methods of super teacher Jaime Escalante. In much the same way one might talk about Superman, Matthews lauds the fact that Escalante is able to teach higher-level mathematics to inner-city children, particularly Mexican Americans, commonly thought of as a high risk, low-achieving group. An example of Escalante's

successful tactics? According to Matthews (2010), “If a student missed two days of his math class, [Escalante] would call the parents and threaten to notify the immigration authorities or say whatever else he thought might motivate them” (p. 173).

For families that are struggling to stay together and stay in the United States due to unlivable conditions in their home countries, the threat of calling immigration authorities practically explodes the motivational metaphor of the carrot and stick. The possible consequences inherent in the threat that Escalante is making include children being separated from one or both of their parents, perhaps forever, and/or being deported to live in conditions of extreme poverty or brutality. This may be a sure path to motivation, but is intense panic and fear the motivational tools we want to rely on?

It is not surprising that Matthews is best known as a champion of the KIPP Charter Schools, whose motto is “No Excuses.” His book on KIPP, titled *Work Hard, Be Nice* (2009), sounds like a power-driven directive similar to one we might give a dog (think, “down boy”). At worst, it suggests a very thinly veiled threat (e.g., if you don’t cooperate there will be serious consequences). Matthews tries to undermine the image of KIPP schools as “militaristic” by noting that in the classroom there are “games and songs and chants and a great deal of movement” (2010, p. 182), never specifying *to what ends*, however. Movement needs purpose and context in order to have meaning.

At KIPP schools, students get weekly paychecks redeemable at the school store, based on “doing their homework, performing well in class, and not misbehaving” (Matthews, 2010, p. 178). Again, the image of a dog rather than a child comes to mind. In the act of meaningful learning, children do much more than simply perform. And it goes without saying that what constitutes “not misbehaving” -- if not culturally biased and highly politicized -- is certainly defined and rendered at the mercy of school administrators and individual teachers, each of whom has different standards of “proper” behavior. If a student calls out in class without raising a hand, for example, this could easily be defined as misbehaving in a school that values order, silence and hierarchies of power. But in another environment, this might be seen as showing initiative, paying close attention, and being highly engaged in the subject at hand.

These hierarchies of power have a role to play, however. As *Waiting for Superman* makes clear, school reform is directly linked to larger concerns about America’s world dominance and economic supremacy. When students’ test scores increase, we regain confidence that we are poised to out-compete our rivals (e.g., other nations). The idea that education’s primary purpose is market-driven is barely disguised. Consider, for example, a recent quotation by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan: “We’ve flatlined while other countries have passed us by....The country that out-educates us today will out-compete us tomorrow” (Hirsh, 2010, p. 40).

This, in turn, leads many policymakers and educational reformers to talk about schools as factories and students as products rather than people. For example, it is common to read statements like “we’re not *producing* scientists and engineers fast enough to keep pace with the rest of the world” (Chilcott, 2010, p. 21; emphasis mine), or schools must “ensure *maximum return* in the form of student achievement” (Strickland, 2010, p. 75; emphasis mine). We likewise talk about an educational system designed for “maximum accomplishment” (Strickland, p. 76). In the written companion guide to *Waiting for Superman*, the text is laced with words like *incentives, perform, value, rewards, corollary, control, efficiency, resource usage, measure, fix, and clientele* to talk about a process that is, bottom line, about *people* not *products* or business transactions.

The film’s companion guide describes teachers in much the same way. In “The Difference is Great Teachers,” Eric Hanushek (2010), a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University, represents the views of a growing majority of Americans that teacher quality can be measured in highly simplistic ways. Much of the current national rhetoric about teaching suggests that we should directly tie teacher’s salaries to their students’ standardized test scores. Many people also argue that teachers whose students don’t make “adequate yearly progress” on these tests should be put on notice or removed from the classroom entirely. The multiple problems with such tests, including cultural bias and ambiguity, have been well documented, but this doesn’t seem to deter those determined to believe in their scientific purity.

Hanushek writes about teachers in near robotic terms. He notes, for example, that “teachers near the top of the *quality distribution* can get an entire year’s worth of additional learning out of their students” (p. 84). This may seem like an innocuous statement, but when you unpack it, it is deeply troubling. First of all, what does it mean to talk of a teacher -- a human being, a role model, a caring and committed adult that, ideally, has a genuine relationship with students -- in terms of “quality distribution”? And is learning something we *get out of* students? That may be even more absurd than the idea that learning is something we *put into* students.

Hanushek goes even further to suggest that "If we could simply eliminate the bottom 5 to 10 percent of teachers...and replace them with average teachers, we could dramatically change student outcomes" (p. 98). It is tempting to think that the solution to improving our public school system could be so straightforward, but we must pause and consider what it means to talk about a group of teachers as if they were last year's model of computers that we can simply upgrade upon command. Indeed, school reform rhetoric is riddled with the mechanistic word *fix*, as opposed to words that suggest human transformation such as *re-imagine*, *stimulate*, *empower*, *support*, or *invigorate*.

And even when we are not talking about teachers in mechanistic terms, we still find ways to reduce the practice of good teaching to a kind of age-old *recipe* that should not be improvised upon. Geoffrey Canada, President of the Harlem Children's Zone, for example, notes that "Finding great teachers is the 'secret sauce' of great schools and, in particular, great charter schools" (2010, p. 94). Controversial Washington D.C. schools' Chancellor Michele Rhee, who recently resigned, has noted that "...when we guide children *in the right way* as adults, children of *every* background will go in the *right direction*" (p. 140; emphasis mine).

The idea that there exists a "secret sauce" for school improvement, or that there is one "right way" and one "right direction" for children of *every* background is simplistic at best. But simplistic is endemic to national educational policies such as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and *Race to the Top* (RtT; 2009), policies that suggest that blind obedience, speed, and victory are the cornerstones of good education.

These national policies hold hostage federal funds that many urban public schools desperately need to improve, and/or simply cannot afford to operate without. They thus force local policymakers and educational professionals to approach teaching and learning as fierce competition, with a narrowly defined finish line (e.g., standardized test results in math and reading). When these test scores increase, we believe, often mistakenly, that we are helping students, particularly those attending urban public schools and pejoratively labeled *at-risk* -- to catch up to their more privileged peers. They might not ever exactly *pass them* in the race, but at least they won't be left behind. (Sign of relief.)

For obvious reasons, I call these policies "The New Three R's of Education: *Relay Race Reform*." When we strive for no child left behind, we say nothing of what we actually *want* for children. We say nothing about the qualities necessary for children to become wise leaders, team players and problem solvers in an increasingly complex world order. Similarly, when we rave about reaching adequate yearly progress, we underscore our incredibly low expectations. Adequate? How many parents would say that they hope their child will grow up to be adequate? How many upper-middle-class white parents would see adequate as an acceptable benchmark? How many upper-middle-class white parents would be happy to hear their children define themselves as "only two points away from being proficient," as Rhee (2010, p. 130) observes glowingly of a student in her chapter, "Putting Kids First"?

Indeed, at the same time we encourage everyone to join the race to the top, we make it abundantly clear that there isn't enough room at the top for everyone. For example, *Race to the Top* funds are highly competitive, and each year many needy states and school districts become embittered losers. In many ways, I believe that the relay race metaphor of reform is, in fact, a way of turning the *status quo*, in both education and American society more generally, into what *seems* like a fair competition.

NCLB, for example, purports to be about helping *all* children succeed and asks schools to disaggregate data based on such things as race, class, language, special education. It emphasizes that groups of children who are perpetually labeled at-risk can succeed in school rather than fulfill the dominant prophecy that large numbers of them will fail (e.g., drop out or get pushed out). The rhetoric of *No Child Left Behind* masks the very real politics of education and equity, where all children do not start the race at the same point, and are not given the same advantages -- in some cases, something as simple as a good night's sleep and a warm breakfast before they start running.

In other words, this race will never be fair when different groups of students have such vastly different access to critical educational resources *and* social services that address their most basic needs, including to be well fed, warm, and physically safe; to have access to adequate health care; and to be understood in their own languages in the process of becoming bi-lingual. The list is very long. Put another way, how can we expect schools to single-handedly wipe out vast inequalities in education, when these inequalities are entrenched in our entire social system? In a rare voice of reason, AFT leader Randi Weingarten (2010) writes that it is flawed "to think that simply removing poorly performing teachers, rather than focusing on systemic changes, will help all kids" (p. 152).

Likewise, when we talk about at-risk students, words like *recovery* and *re-training* emphasize the inherently individualized and *deficit model* we begin with. In the companion guide to *Waiting For Superman*, the cultural,

community and home-life of at-risk students is reduced to simple “distractions” (Chilcot, 2010, p. 59), and we seek solutions that will “make up for the typical deficit that we see in the preparation of kids from disadvantaged backgrounds” (Hanuschek, 2010, p. 85). The wealth of positive influences and examples of incredible bravery, initiative, sacrifice, collaboration, pride, unity, generosity, and care that many of these disadvantaged children and their families exhibit is not acknowledged here.

Eric Schwartz (2010), cofounder and CEO of Citizen Schools, noting that children only spend an average of 20% of their waking hours in school, goes so far as to suggest that, “If we’re serious about closing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children, we need to attack the time issue and find ways to make much better use of the 80 percent that is *now largely wasted*” (p. 106; emphasis mine). Many if not most of these students are spending their time outside of school working in part-time jobs to support their families, watching younger siblings or aged relatives while their parents work double-shifts, doing homework, and/or engaging in a wide range of community enrichment and development projects. It is easy to focus on *the ghetto* as “a place with no hope and no prospects for the future,” as Bill Strickland writes in “How Schools Kill Neighborhoods – and Can Help Save Them” (2010, p. 72). But this definition robs people of individual and collective will, and reduces complex communities to singular visions of doom.

In sum, I believe that we, as a country, continue to embrace two dialectical beliefs about school reform: The first is that children’s fate is largely pre-determined by their inherent intelligence, meritocracy, and family background, while the second is that under the right conditions, *all* children have the same opportunity for success. The first viewpoint is most evident in the writings of so-called scientist Charles Murray, who argues in his book *The Bell Curve* (1994), that academic achievement is tied to innate academic ability. He further suggests that pedagogy, teacher training, homework, and reductions in class size are powerless to change this immutable scientific fact. It is also evident in a recent article in *Newsweek*, when Mourshed and Whelan (2010) report:

All over the world, your chances of success in school and life depend more on your family circumstances than on any other factor. By age three, kids with professional parents are already a full year ahead of their poorer peers. They know twice as many words and score 40 points higher on IQ tests. By age 10, the gap is three years. By then, some poor children have not mastered basic reading and math skills, and many never will: this is the age at *which failure starts to become irreversible*. (p. 35; emphasis mine)

In contrast, films like *Waiting for Superman* and the companion guide suggest that providing a successful school experience for all students may be as simple as desiring it. As Bill Strickland notes glibly: “Failed schools fail in part due to their inability or unwillingness to seek help on behalf of their students, while successful schools are constantly looking and reaching out” (p. 79). It’s hard to imagine that anyone who has spent time in schools in impoverished communities and communities of color – often the first to be labeled as failing – would believe that these schools are “unwilling to accept help” and are not “reaching out.” Indeed, many would argue that quite the opposite is true. These schools are screaming out for help, but the only help made readily available to them is the scapegoating of teachers and unions, and efforts to better prepare schools to teach to the test. For in the current reform climate, only that which can be tested and measured is of value.

In conclusion, it must be emphasized that if we continue down this road, we are not only teaching children that the most important things are to move quickly and follow orders, but *we are also actively truncating their creativity and critical thinking skills*. In an effort to take the risk out of the pejoratively labeled at-risk student population, we are taking the risk out of education entirely. We are reducing the deeply complex and always unfinished process of becoming educated – a process whereby children have opportunities to use data in meaningful contexts and see themselves as capable of thriving in constantly changing circumstances – to the narrow process of collecting, memorizing, and repeating data in sequential patterns. There is no role for uncertainty, innovation, reflection, risk or critical inquiry.

Indeed, last year my son, who attends a neighborhood urban public school, came home with a science contract that he had to sign and that I had to witness and then co-sign. One clause stood out: “**I promise to do each step in order and not to try anything unknown.**” Even my fourth grade son was able to see the irony as he dutifully signed away his right to question and innovate.

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