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Waiting for 'Superman': A Review and Commentary

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Academic Leadership Journal

The documentary “Waiting for ‘Superman’” shines a light on many issues in public education. The film was released too much fanfare in late September of 2010. It received a lot of media attention and seemed to get everyone talking about American education and how to fix its problems. NBC’s television networks went so far as to dedicate an entire week of programming to the topic of education. Their “Education Week” aired several town hall meetings and debates with leaders in education. However, “Education Week” ended and with it so ended the mainstream media’s coverage of education reform. I had hoped the DVD release of “Waiting for ‘Superman’” this past February would again provide a spark of awareness to the many challenges that face America’s public education system and allow a wider audience to view this eye opening film. Regrettably, the DVD release without much fanfare, being snubbed by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science for a best documentary Oscar nomination didn’t help either. I still believe this is an important film and it can help make substantive changes to our country’s public education system. What follows is my review of two of the film’s main messages; importance of quality teachers and effectiveness of charter schools.

Importance of Teacher Quality

I feel it important to begin this review with the topic of teacher quality. As a teacher educator I was glad to see the film emphasize the importance of quality teachers on students’ success in school. Most would acknowledge that teachers are an important part of students’ educational success; however some would contend that the influence of families and peer groups would have a stronger influence. According to Eric Hanushek (2010), the researcher from Stanford University featured in the film, the reason many people may have this perception is because of a large scale study conducted on schools in 1966 called the Equality of Education Opportunity. The study found no clear statistical effect of teachers on student performance, rather family and peers were the most important variables. But the Equality of Education project used very limited variables when considering teachers’ “quality,” one such variable was if the teacher held a master’s degree.

We know that the characteristics that make a teacher exceptional are more complex than what degree they hold. Just one of the many important aspects of quality teaching is relationships with students. Bridgett Harme and Robert Pianta (2001) conducted a focused study of how important teacher-student relationships can be. They concluded that students with stronger, more positive relationship with their teachers in kindergarten did better academically and behaviorally, all the way through 8th grade. The positive relationship with their kindergarten teacher was particularly effective for students with high levels of behavioral problems. Basically, this means that “challenging” students had fewer behavior problems and did better academically if they had a strong relationship with their kindergarten teacher when compared to students that didn’t have as positive of a relationship. I again want to emphasize, the kids with stronger relationships did better all the way through 8th grade! If one teacher can make a difference that last 8 years imagine the effect of 8 great teachers for 8 straight years. Also, keep in mind this study only looked at teacher-student relationships, when we start to consider things like teachers’ knowledge of the content they are teaching, teaching methodologies, involvement with

parents, collaboration with other teachers, and other teacher controlled variables we can see that a “quality” teacher may in fact be the most important factor in student success, rather than the least.

In the film Hanushek shares his research findings indicating that students with high performing teachers progress three times faster than students with low performing teachers. The film goes on to illustrate this point saying a poor teacher only covers about 50 percent of the years curriculum while a good teacher can cover 150 percent of the years curriculum. He also illustrated how these effects can compound over several years.

The film suggests that possibly the best way to improve teacher quality is to eliminate tenure for teachers and utilize merit pay based systems. These are both very complex issues, volumes have been written about teacher tenure and pay-for-performance systems and for this article I will not attempt to bring clarity to such complicated, long evolving debates. Instead I would like to point out a very important aspect of merit pay that I felt the film should have illustrated in more detail, that being how you assess teacher quality. It is one thing to decide that better teachers should get paid more, but it is another to truly identify who is “better.” Now, in the case of a school’s worst teacher and best teacher it may be easy to determine which is which, but ranking the quality of everyone in the middle can get more complex. Students’ scores on state tests provide a lot of data about teacher effectiveness. But many argue that there is a lot more to good teaching than getting a student to pass a test. Others may say that academic success is the fundamental purpose of schools so it should be used to assess teachers. On each side of the debate are a plethora of variables to consider.

One area I feel consistently gets left out of the pay-for-performance debate is how you identify which teacher is responsible for what knowledge. Allow me to illustrate with an example. For the sake of argument, assume that we have determined the best way to measure a math teacher’s quality is by his/her students’ scores on a state math exam, better scores means better teacher. What if many of the students in the math teacher’s class, let’s call her Mrs. M, are also in a science class with Mr. S. Let’s say Mrs. M. is a poor teacher, her students are generally confused by her teaching and struggle to understand her lessons. While Mr. S is an exceptional science teacher, his kids quickly connect with his lessons and master the content. Being such an exceptional teacher Mr. S consistently connects lessons to other content. His students commonly use math skills to understand their experiments and writing skills to complete detailed lab reports. When the students take their state math test they generally do pretty well, but not because of their math teacher. Much of the students’ math knowledge was actually acquired from Mr. S and not from Mrs. M. You can see this type of overlap could happen in many content areas or even across years. The great instruction of an algebra teacher could help students do better on state math test in later years. Basically, just because a student does well on a content test it does not mean that the content teacher for the subject during that year is solely responsible. I feel this is a common occurrence because the impact of truly great teachers goes beyond the walls of one classroom.

Despite these challenges some schools are making strides to address the issues of teacher tenure and quality based pay in an effective manner. Denver Public Schools’ ProComp Program is one that has successfully implemented a dynamic merit pay system that provides teachers with pay level bumps for; professional development, advanced degrees, student loan assistance, positive administrative evaluations, working in hard to staff schools, student growth, and school based performance. Denver’s ProComp has also shown some positive impacts on student achievement and it has generally been

positively received by teachers and administrators (Wiley, Spindler, & Subert, 2010).

As a teacher educator I greatly appreciate the film's emphasis on the impact a teacher can have on student learning. A child's family life will still have a profound impact on their success in school, but teachers need to focus on the children in their rooms. Shifting the blame of why students may be struggling in school does little to help their situations. Regardless of a child's circumstances, a good teacher can make a big difference. When discussing how to reform America's schools it is important to remember the power that individual teachers have. Large scale organizational changes can be made to how public school system operates, and those changes may also be important, but great teachers will make any school system better whether it is our current system or a new innovative one.

Charter Schools

"Waiting for 'Superman'" casts charter schools, along with Michele Rhee, as their story's heroes. Michele Rhee has since resigned from her position at Washington D.C.'s Public Schools after a newly elected mayor took office. Although her changes had substantial impact on the city's school she is no longer playing an active role in education reform. So, as the film's title suggests, children are still waiting for someone to come and save them. Charter schools were also presented as a possible 'Superman,' are they?

Some charter schools are extremely effective, and so are some public schools. Charter schools are a revolutionary approach to education reform. I cannot recall a single change in education, with the exception of the No Child Left Behind Act, that has altered the landscape of our schools in the last 30 years as much as charter schools have. However, the film does mention, ever so briefly, that only 1 in 5 charter schools produces "amazing" results. I think this is something very important to understand when viewing charter schools as solution to our public school problems.

Currently, there are around 5,000 charter schools across the country. The largest study on them was conducted by the National Center for Education Evaluation (NCEE)(Gleason et al., 2010). The NCEE studied the impact of charter schools across the nation to compare their effect on students relative to public school alternatives. It is important to note that this study only included charter schools that had lotteries, meaning demand for enrollment was higher than spots available for students. Not all charter schools are in such high demand, some struggle to recruit enough students to keep operational. It is not uncommon in some areas for new charter schools to open up and then close in a few short years and then be replaced by another new school that again only lasts a few years. The NCEE study only analyzed schools that had a proven track record of student enrollment and had been in operation for at least 2 years. So, one might expect the study to show impressive results since the schools studied were so selectively included. But you would be wrong. The NCEE study looked at students' math and reading scores on statewide tests. Their findings indicated that charter schools did not have statistically significant impact on student achievement. In fact, although the difference was not statically significant, the students that were accepted in the schools lottery did worse on state math and reading tests than their peers that were not chosen in the lottery. But we all know there is more to a good school than test scores, so what about other factors? Well again, there was no significant difference in outcomes like absences, suspension, student effort, student well being, or other variables measured. The only positive results seem to be in satisfaction with the school. Students in charter schools were 12 percent more likely to report they liked the school and their parents were 33 percent more likely to rate their kids school as "excellent."

So, was the film presenting us with a Hollywood adaptation of reality? Are charter schools really not the answer? It turns out the film actually did a pretty job of showing the viewers *part* of the reality of charter schools. Looking further into the NCEE study (Gleason, et al., 2010) we find that there is a great deal of variation in individual charter schools. On average the charter schools did not make much of an impact on students, but at some schools students who were selected in lotteries did a great deal better than their peers that were left behind, while at other schools students selected did much worse. So, just like with public schools, some are outstanding and others are not. The NCEE study identified a wide range in the charter schools – there were extreme differences in the schools on each end of the spectrum. “Waiting for ‘Superman’” focused its attention on the effective charter schools, those are the ones we got to see. So, what makes a charter school a great one? The NCEE (Gleason, et al., 2010) again provides some helpful clues. First, charter schools appear to be more effective for students that are lower achieving or lower income. Also, charter school appeared to be most effective in urban areas. Additional studies have indicated that charter schools with high student retention rates are more successful (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Nelson & Miron, 2005). Parent and community involvement also appear to be important to the success of a charter school (Zimmer & Buddin, 2007), as well as longevity (Sass, 2006). In his study of charter schools in Florida, Sass (2006) found that charter schools with at least five years of operational experience, on average, were as successful as traditional public schools.

That brings us back to ‘Superman.’ Are charter schools the ‘Superman’ our kinds are waiting for? The answer does not seem as clear as the film made it appear. What we do know is that charter schools are much better at making substantive changes to curriculum and structure of the school experience. As the film illustrated with Michelle Rhee and Washington, D.C.’s schools, public schools are generally a large bureaucratic networks and it is difficult to make significant changes. Charter schools on the other hand are quick to make drastic changes, but sometimes those changes have mixed results. For each charter school that does exceptionally well there is one that drastically underperforms. It is important to remember, charter schools are relatively new in widespread education reform. There are still 10 states where charter schools are not permitted to operate. We are still in the early stages of this movement and we are learning what works best. I think it is important to learn from the effective charter schools and implement effective practices into other charters as well as public schools. At this point charter schools are not the ‘Superman’ our kids need, but they have also shown they are not a passing fad in education. In a time when education reform is usually more talk than walk, charter schools are taking action and making real changes in how we educate our youth. It is my belief that they need the support of the educational community and the public to ensure the active participation in change continues.

Closing Thoughts

A naive person might put the blame on the kids. They might say things like, they need to work harder at their own education. It is not easy but if you work hard you can get yourself out of a bad situation. Some people may even say, it wasn’t easy for me to be successful in school, but I did what I needed to graduate and I even when on to get a college degree, so if I can do it anyone can.

There is no doubt that some of the responsibility to being successful in education in on the students. However, it is also important to remember that these are kids, and most can’t do it all on their own.

When over 40 percent of a school's students are dropping out before graduation, there are bigger problems than students not working hard enough. One graphic that remains in my mind from the film is the national map with flags identifying "dropout factories" across the nation. They said there were over 2,000 "dropout factories" across the nation where over 40 percent of the students don't graduate on time. Over 2,000 schools. That number really sticks with me. How can anyone think all kids have the same educational opportunities when kids who go to one of those 2,000 schools barely have a 50-50 chance at graduating? This solidifies my belief that the problem is not the kids. Pulling yourself up by your bootstraps and putting in a lot of work is not what these children need. They need opportunity, they need hope, they need a chance to *succeed* not to just *survive*.

I began this review speaking to the importance of teacher quality, so it might seem contradictory to end with the value of parents and families but that is how I would like to close this review. The film makers did an exceptional job of pulling at your heart as the movie closes. Seeing the kids and their parents' disappointment was sad and frustrating. But I have to admit that I feel Francisco, Bianca, Daisy, Emily, and Anthony have a good chance of being okay. The reason is because their families care a great deal about their education. You see throughout the film the children's families really cared about the success of their kids. There were scenes that showed parents working to communicate with teachers and parents researching schools to find the best place for their kids. The simple fact that education is important in these families can go a long way. As a former public school teacher in Houston, TX and Columbus, OH, I have seen several families that don't care about their children's education; those are the kids that I really worry about. If a parent is researching various charter schools, filling out application paperwork, and setting up meetings, they obviously care about schooling and those actions will make a difference.

This film was a call to action for school reform and I hope that it does lead to more action from all stakeholders. The action can come from teachers, administrators, politicians, and community members, but the action can also come from the kids not giving up and families making education a priority. Maintaining the status quo is not an option. Literally thousands of kids are being left behind and business as usual is only making matters worse. We need to realize that 'Superman' may never come and save our schools. There may not be one 'Man' or idea that is going to solve these problems. Maybe our children are really waiting for super 'Men.' We need a lot of different people to display extraordinary abilities. We need teachers that are faster than a speeding bullet, parents and families that are stronger than a locomotive, and even kids that can leap a tall building in a single bound. We all need to stop *waiting* for 'Superman' and start *being* 'Supermen.'

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