Waiting for Superman and Public Education:
"Charter Schools and Everything Public"

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Sandra Oboh
Professor Cynthia Chris
Culture Theory and the Documentary

“When it came time to choose a school for my children, my thoughts on public schools did not matter as much as sending them to a failing school. Every day, I drive by three public schools as I take my kid to private school, but I’m lucky, I have a choice” (Waiting for Superman). A few moments later in the film *Waiting for Superman*, Davis Guggenheim, an anxious director, ponders over the troubling lives of kids who, unlike him, could not afford the opportunity to attend a private school. Guggenheim, most notable for his earlier work, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), wanted the same kind of success *An Inconvenient Truth* had in raising awareness on global warming for *Waiting for Superman* and its focus, public education (MTV NEWS). Years later, at the tender age of forty five, Guggenheim embarked on a journey, seeking a solution towards closing the achievement gap. The ambitious director would document his findings in a documentary that would garner major controversy.

Guggenheim and advocates of reform creatively appropriate the language and issues of a complicated education system in such a way that the very real problems are expressed in terms the general public can understand. These powerful groups use their privilege to provide a solution to “our” problems. Although Guggenheim and many of his followers lack pedagogical experience, they have the authority to not only pinpoint who is at fault, but also offer a solution to a complex problem. However, the important question to ask here is: Is *Waiting for Superman* a conversation starter for Charters, and if so, is it a valid one? Does *Waiting for Superman* provide solutions towards closing the achievement gap? The goal of this paper is to analyze whether or not the film is a conversation starter for public education, and if it is, is it a valid one? A critical examination of the film's arguments and assumptions will be analyzed, along with the analysis of how the film makes these arguments. In the process, certain questions will arise from its contradictions and omission of facts. A further look at the public education system will be interrogated in order to expose the nuances between charter and public schools. The analysis of *Waiting for Superman* as a cultural production provides meaningful insights into questions of

how the audience becomes a part of a larger discourse outside the film's apparatus. In addition, such an analysis is needed in order to understand the social context of the films argument.

In 2010, the year *Waiting for Superman* was released, the political state of the economy was heavily concerned with America's achievement gap. A year before the film's release, Michelle Rhee and other reformers (including the nation's president), set out to drastically change the education system. In efforts of quickening the pace of radical change, during Rhee's office as Chancellor of Washington, D.C, she closed down dozens of schools and fired over 1,000 teachers (Oprah). Rhee is an important figure in the film *Waiting for Superman*, her unorthodox approach is highlighted and she is portrayed as a radical savior who will stop at nothing to ensure the education of helpless children. The film documents her reign as chancellor which provides an insight to a very stressful nation. During that same year, in May 2009, President Obama also announced a plan to shut down 5,000 failing schools and re-open with new principals and teachers over a five-year span, with five billion dollars being spent towards this end. But lacking the power to force the hands of local governments, he set up a 'Race to the Top', intended to bully superintendents and principals to bend to the will of power (Peterson). In the midst of all this, Guggenheim was conjuring up data that would help illustrate the complexities of a deeply flawed system. A year later, Guggenheim released the film, *Waiting for Superman*. The release date of Guggenheim's film was not accidental; it helped culminate the critical debate concerning educational reform. Guggenheim's public appearance during the film's promotional period also garnered more attention towards the education debate.

On MTV news, Guggenheim explained: "A new generation of reformers who are doing an amazing job…are starting to break the code on how you can educate kids, even in the toughest neighborhoods. 'I'm trying to attack in this movie . . . this mental block that a lot of Americans have—which is that the problems with our schools are too complex, they've been broken for too long: and it's impossible [to fix]''(MTV NEWS). His appearances drew a large amount of national buzz from

publications and media outlets including: *The New York Times, CNN, The Oprah Winfrey Show, Wall Street Journal, and NewsWeek,* to name a few. Celebrities such as John Legend and Jessica Alba also took a particular interest in the films argument. Part of the film's appeal was that it displayed complicated issues in the simplest data, which helped keep viewers with little knowledge concerning public education well-informed and intrigued.

The film discusses the issues of public education by documenting the lives of five children and their plight in getting into the charter school of their dreams. The five children are pitted against a lottery system built out of necessity, Guggenheim's documentary suggests, since American public schools have essentially thrown their hands up in surrender to the academic dominance of rival nations and feverish governmental intervention into the education quagmire; because of this, it was inevitable *Waiting for Superman* would generate political traction for its exuberant reform ambitions (Olorunda, 5). The film features long interviews and footage of families in urban neighborhoods interspersed with fast-paced cartoon-overviews about how the system as a whole works, and very oversimplified presentations of data. The filmmaker pays lip-service to a few disclaimers (that a child's home life makes a difference, that there are some good public schools, and only 1⁄5th of charter schools are making somewhat of a difference over public schools,) but he does not expand on those points at all, and proceeds to place all of the blame on teachers, calling them lazy, unmotivated, selfish, and greedy for power. The film opens with its main protagonist, Geoffrey Canada, explaining his sadness when he found out 'Superman' was unreal and just a fictional character. Implying that all kids hope and dream to be rescued by 'Superman', Guggenheim thought it best to entitle his film "*Waiting for Superman.*"

'Superman' is, according to many cultural outlets (imdb.com, superman.com, comics, etc.), a prominent American popular cultural figure. Superman took on the role of social activist, fighting crooked businessmen and politicians and demolishing run-down tenements (Daniels, 18). Superman's immigrant status is a key aspect of his appeal; a critic of Superman saw the character as pushing the

boundaries of acceptance in America. The extraterrestrial origin was seen by Regaldo as challenging the notion that Anglo-Saxon ancestry was the source of all might (Regaldo, 92). Guggenheim and many of the venture philanthropists (supporters and funders of the film and charter schools) represent the 'superhero'. The director's choice of naming the film after this American superhero is not surprising: A popular motif in American culture has been the notion of the white messiah saving brown people. Unfortunately, postmodern cinema has since made a fine fetish of primarily inner-city high school narratives, where students of color feature prominently as wild beasts to be tamed by omniscient white saviors. *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *High School High* (1996), *Sunset Park* (1996), and *Freedom Writers* (2007) are but a few examples (Olorunda, 167). Unlike the era in which the character derived from, the reformers of education are not relatable to the people they are saving. There is nothing transcendental about their images; if anything, it is a constant reminder of how powerless the urban youth feels and how much they need the help of others. Guggenheim and those like him seem to be the bleeding heart that, in true liberal form, acknowledge their privileges and want to pick battles with whoever is trampling down the futures of poor brown kids who stumbled into a world where their destinies were written out before birth.

These brown kids are immediately introduced during the beginning scenes of the film. The director first introduces Anthony, an African American male in the fifth grade who lives in Washington, D.C. The success of his education is at odds: He lives with an uneducated grandmother, who is his family's leading matriarch; a father who lost his life battling drugs; and a missing mother. As a result, Anthony only has hope to rely on. While he is a struggling student, repeating the second grade, he turns a new leaf and is now studious. With a new appreciation for academics, he has recovered his motivation and is destined for change with the help of a very determined and involved grandmother. His chances to succeed can only materialize with the help of SEED Charter School, where 9 of 10 students go on to college. But as one of 61 applicants, with only 24 open spots, his chances are slim (Waiting for Superman).

Daisy, the second child interviewed, is a fifth grader residing in East Los Angeles, where 6 of every 10 kids in her neighborhood do not graduate high school. She is the child of Latino parents who did not graduate high school, and like them, Daisy may have to face reality sooner than later and begin contributing to the funds of a family who is struggling to stay afloat above the poverty line. She is soon to enter one of the worst performing middle schools in Los Angeles, and if she somehow manages to survive the next several years would be first in her family to graduate high school. KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) LA PREP, with the seventh highest Academic Performance Index score of all district middle schools, can rescue her (Oluranda, 165). But to get in, Daisy must compete to be among the 10 chosen from 135 applicants.

Bianca is an African American kindergartner living in Harlem, New York, with her mother, Nakia. Her mother struggles every month to squirrel away $500 so Bianca can attend a private school which triumphs over the neighboring schools, all of which are failing academically. However, at Harlem Success Academy, Bianca wouldn't have to face tuition issues; like most charter schools, Harlem Success Academy is funded by tax payers and private donations from venture philanthropists. Unfortunately, 767 students are pushing against probability for an open 35 spots, and hope is the only string left to grab onto (Waiting for Superman).

Francisco is a Hispanic American first grader living in the Bronx whose mother, Maria, is the first in her family to attend college, let alone graduate from college. She is a determined mother who wants her child to succeed; she admits that that it is troubling that her son has to go through metal detectors every morning just to enter the school building. To change this, she sends out applications to seven charter schools, all of which have turned him down. Fortunately, Harlem Success Academy, a 45-minute commute from home, can help save this little man. Like Bianca, he must compete with 792 applicants vying for a meager 40 open slots.

Emily, the only white female being interviewed, is an eighth grader living in a wealthy Californian suburb. Her problems differ significantly from her counterparts: For one, she is white and privileged, and attends a school with a great pedigree featuring water polo, a swimming pool, and state-of-the-art drama theater. Being the self aware individual that she is, Emily declared on the Oprah show ‘‘I’m very smart and intellectual, but I don’t test well. And if I had gone to my neighborhood school, I would have been put in the low classes with the teachers who have their tenures, so they’re protected, but they’re not that really excited to teach you. I’d be with the kids who wouldn’t be willing to learn...I’d be on the road to failure.’’ She is very insightful and profoundly articulate for a fifth grader, and she knows exactly why she would ‘fail’ if she were to attend her local high school. She is competing with 454 other students for a slot among the 110 chosen to attend Summit Preparatory Charter High School. At Summit they do not track students; everyone is held to equally high standards and given equal encouragement to attend college.

The film proposes that charter schools are the best option for those kids and families who are unsatisfied with the results of their public schools. For those students (most likely all) who would rather attend Princeton than prison seem to have only one option: Escape their neighborhood public schools, win a lottery ticket into a charter school or private school at which science and math feature prominently, graduate, attend college, graduate, fall in line to compete in the global economy (for possibly nonexistent jobs), reflect on a fulfilled life, and ultimately slip into a coffin (Oluranda, 165). At first glance this argument seems plausible because the children’s situation cannot get much worse; however, the problem with this argument is that charters are not necessarily better than public schools, and an unbiased view must take precedence over the favoring of charters in order to provide a valid solution. Throughout the film, Guggenheim paints the picture that charter schools, if not the best solution, are the key to a solution that will close the achievement gap. He also takes a side by declaring his utter disdain towards public school unions. Guggenheim narrates this point of view by using statistics

to illustrate America's reading and math scores, dropout rates, and the web of local, state, federal, and union bureaucracies that prevent "good" teaching. The film's central argument is defended by its attempts to prove that bad schools are dictated by organized bureaucratic unions that prevent children from fulfilling their academic potential. Guggenheim first makes it a point to educate America on where they stand globally when it comes to our youth's education. The rhetorical method used to deploy these statistics is through his various animated sequences. These sequences are informative and thought-provoking; they render the interest of audiences who ordinarily would not read local newspapers because of the political jargon embedded in them. In one notable animation sequence, Guggenheim illustrates the reading levels of American children nationally. The animation emerges with an image of the U.S flag followed by various states reading proficiency scores, with the sequence culminating with the nation's capital score of a hauntingly low 12%. The data presented in this sequence makes it seem as though more than 70% of American students are illiterate, based on NAEP results that really conclude a much less dramatic (though still worrisome) 25% of students are performing at "below basic" levels (Kober and Usher, 30).

A factual claim, but one that needs more interrogation, is deployed through an animated diagram of the American prison system. Apparently, the state pays $33,000 a year on each prisoner, and the total cost of an average prison term (4 years) is 132,000 dollars. However, if one were to use the same money to send a child to private school from k-12, then the price would only amount to $107,900, leaving a staggering $8,300 left over for college (Waiting for Superman). While this information is profound and worth pondering, Guggenheim fails to adequately investigate why the government spends more money on prison than a child's education. Society has repeatedly claimed that the safety of "our" people is most important, leaving the education of children (mostly brown) secondary. This is made evident by the amount of media coverage dedicated to protecting "our" people. With this being said, it is no wonder that the government spends more money on prison than education. As a result of this, many people are

incarcerated in order to protect and prevent ‘harm.’ ‘Harm’ in this case is very vague. ‘We’ are protected by the incarceration of those who do not abide by the law, including but not limited to: Drug ‘use,’ the possession of ‘drugs,’ ‘looking’ suspicious, homicide, robbery, and terrorist threats. Without a doubt, there is a causal relationship between those who are in prison, those who live in inner city neighborhoods, and those who are not adequately educated. For instance, many of the people in jail are from inner city neighborhoods and those people from inner city neighborhoods are not educated (by America’s standards). These factors, of course, tie into larger factors that are traced to the forms of institutionalized racism (corporations, universities, etc.) which perpetuate these constraints.

Another (rather salient) animation sequence, “The Dance of the Lemons”, has received a countless amount of backlash from opponents of the film, including 'Rethinking Schools', a non-profit publisher of educational materials. The scene starts off by expressing a provision in the union contract that provides the 'dance of the lemons'. When a school is completely dysfunctional, good people tend to do weird things, principals have 'lemons' that are chronically bad, but the union contract says that they cannot be fired. Instead, at the end of each year, principals get together and do the 'lemon dance' where Fred give Jackie his 'lemons' and Jackie gives Sallie her 'lemons' and so forth in hopes to make “lemonade?” (Waiting for Superman). In the animation sequence, Guggenheim fails to mention how union policies protect a teacher’s due process with procedures in place to “counsel out” those teachers who indeed need to find another profession (Apple, 372). According to David Macaray, a writer and expert on unions wrote in *CounterPunch* that: ‘‘Who honestly believes a teachers’ union . . . has the authority to insist that management keep unqualified teachers? . . . Since when does a labor union dictate to management? Since when does the hired help tell the bosses what to do?’’ (1).

The film targets unions and their lack of taking of responsibility for the mess they have created, and how these evil schemers have prevented reformists from achieving their dreams. However, studies show that unions do not account for many public schools. In Georgia, 92.5% of the teachers are non-

union, in South Carolina, 100% of the teachers are non-union, and in North Carolina, 97.7% are non-union (Macaray). What does Guggenheim have to say about the amount of non-unions throughout the South? Are they to blame too? Guggenheim goes on, praising Finland for their outstanding scores that outrank Americans, but fails to state that they, too, are fully unionized. In addition, teaching there is carried on in a nation that is much more homogeneous and much wealthier than most districts in the United States, with universal access to a life-long national social support system (Apple, 372). In late September 2010, when CBS News host Katie Couric echoed critics who have challenged his claims of evil unions who are to blame for poor education, a semi-confident Guggenheim sputters, ‘‘I’m a big believer in unions. I think the teacher’s union should be alive for a long time’’; he then explained that his union, the Director's Guild of America, sternly protects his rights and keeps him in good financial shape; but with the teachers’ unions, ‘‘...Contracts have become so stringent, that they’ve gotten in the way of running a school.’’ Called for at this precipice of history are ‘‘unions that are flexible,’’ union leaders obediently ‘‘rethinking things like tenure, and rethinking things like how . . . you assess and evaluate teachers” (Katie Couric). Yet he would later be seen scolding unions during an interview with PBS host Tavis Smiley a few days after he made the statement about supporting unions (Travis Smiley).

Another controversial claim made by the film's animated sequence is displayed in a Disney-esque feature of children waiting in an atrocious line which is circling around a giant hill in hopes of attending the “best” school (a charter). In this section, Guggenheim admits that only one in five charters reports better results than public schools; however, he fails to mention facts surrounding this staggering statistic which contradicts the entire premise of the film. The Stanford study, ‘‘Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States,‘‘ states that only 17% of charter schools reported academic gains that were significantly better than traditional public schools (15). Guggenheim briefly concedes these numbers, but within a matter of a few seconds. This remains to be the biggest issue of the film and continues to be one of Guggenheim’s major criticisms. If charter schools are not showing the signs of significant change,

then why is there so much praise towards charters? Perhaps he is trying to sell a pipe-less dream, failing to take into account outside factors that are detrimental to a child's performance. On October 4, 2010, John Legend took to the *Huffington Post* to discuss the issue of a nation left behind in math and science test performance by declaring that: ''We cannot stand idly by and allow this institutionalized inequality to continue.'' And though not ''proposing that every public school should become a charter school...we'd be crazy not to try to replicate the conditions that make great charter schools work'' (Legend). Possibly, this is the point that film is trying to make, to draw from the success of certain charters (Harlem Children's Zone, KIPP) and apply it to all public schools. However, the film fails to do so, because it seems to be more concerned with the promotion of radical reforms of charters rather than an unbiased approach of explaining the good and bad of charters and public schools.

Throughout the film, superintendents who are aligned with the film's messages are interviewed; however, the film never shows public school teachers being interviewed. The film depicts the heated tension between unions and charters through graphic scenes including: Stressful board meetings, community yelling sessions, and government conventions. These scenes are the closest one gets to understanding the side of teacher unions as they are being portrayed as lunatics crying over pay checks. Furthermore, charters are presented as pristine institutions that lack any kind of failure worth interrogating. Charter schools continue to be popular both within the film and outside the film, charters are increasing in number and account for about 5,000 schools nationwide, serving over 1.5 million kids (Kober and Usher 5). There are two kinds of charter schools: The regular and the boutique. The boutique charters are fronted by for-profit management corporations and other Wall Street tycoons. The regular, such as Harlem Children's Zone, KIPP, which is seen throughout the film, pushes for school days from 7:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M, including Saturdays (Olorunda, 173). Despite the goal of charters, which is to narrow the achievement gap, data shows otherwise. While scores for NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) have gone up for African American, Latino, and white students, minorities of low-

income families still have lower average test scores than students from higher income families. Too many young people, particularly African Americans, fall behind in test scores and fail to graduate from high school. African Americans have the lowest graduation rates, followed by Latinos (Kober and Usher, 45). Roland Fryer, the youngest African-American to ever receive tenure at Harvard, was featured in a New York Times Magazine piece in 2005. In the article he says: ‘‘I basically want to figure out where blacks went wrong.’’ Regrettably, ‘‘As soon as you say something like, ‘Well, could the black-white test-score gap be genetics?’ everybody gets tensed up. But why shouldn’t that be on the table?” (Roland). Much of the film’s criticism is its failure to talk about the big elephant in the room: ‘Race.’ Even though brown faces comprise most of the film’s frames, what one don’t see are the people who heavily influence many of the film's characters. This includes the film’s backers such as Bill Gates and the Walton family. Even the director’s own race and class (he is white and from the upper class, a graduate of Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C. and Brown University) are deeply embedded in the film but ignored. He narrates most of the film and reflects on his own privileged background in the beginning scenes as he drives his child to private school. Regardless of systemic and structural social inequities that powerfully shape the lives of these children and their caregivers, the film portrays them all as equally tragic figures living outside systematic and institutionalized forms of oppression. The film instead focuses on children who want to desperately succeed; however, they cannot because they are crushed by bureaucracies, bad teachers, and unions unless charters with dynamic leaders can save them. In efforts of tugging the audience’s souls and driving the need for charter reforms, Guggenheim captures the lives of many brown children. However, the systemic issues rooted in race and social class are ever-present, but are never explicitly addressed.

Most of the kids interviewed lack father figures (Bianca, Fernando, Anthony). Many things can be said and speculated about this. Anthony, easily the film’s most charming character, embodies the qualities and characteristics of young urban boys. These young boys are not raised with the patriarchal

values that dictate much of how society operates, and as a result, these boys do not know how to go about autonomy. Patriarchal values are by no means the only form of ideology; however, for a youth that has close to nothing and is reminded everyday of everything they are not, it is important that they have some kind of positive male figure that can influence in ways that may prevent the vicious cycle of oppression. Even Geoffrey Canada, the film's main protagonist and founder of the successful charter institution, Harlem Children's Zone, KIPP, has some words concerning the issues of black male youth. Canada repeatedly rants to outlets like The New York Times about a dire need to ''save'' inner-city black boys, and teach them about foreign concepts like ''fatherhood'' and real ''masculinity" (Tough, 120). The film says nothing about the outside factors that heavily affect a child's overall performance. Maybe it is too idealistic to do so, and to Guggenheim, may take away from the 'point' of film. However, these factors are important and should be talked about if one wants real change.

Paradoxically, despite the film's failure to provide substantial facts that contribute to the analysis of public education, the critics do have many things to learn from this film. Critics can ask how might progressive educators use media (film, radio, television, blogs, etc.) to counter the massive onslaught of attacks on one of the last truly public institutions? And one can think through how to do this while still recognizing that there are indeed serious problems in schools today (Apple, 377). There are certainly examples of counter-narratives that object to the film's argument. *Rethinking Schools* thought it best to introduce their side of the story on September 21, when they launched a Facebook page and a counter-argument online forum titled "NOTwaitingforsuperman.org" in hopes of dispelling the assumptions and contradictions made by the film. With no interest in helping the public understand profoundly complex realities, said the editors in a letter, Guggenheim's documentary instead ''presents misleading information and simplistic 'solutions' that will make it harder for those of us working to improve public education to succeed.'' A ''corporate reform agenda of teacher bashing, union busting, test-based 'accountability' and highly selective, privatized charters'' is no way forward, they said (*Rethinking*

Schools). Included in the site are articles critiquing the film, discussion boards, and essays challenging the policies of those praised in the film, along with their supporters. Other forms of coverage include video links to meetings where one's opinion could be voiced, including one video with a representative of *Rethinking Schools*. Another, less elaborate site, waitingforsupermantruth.org, is sponsored by the Grassroots Education Movement of New York City (GEMNYC), and examines the "Inconvenient Truth behind Waiting for Superman" with links to articles critiquing the film.

In addition, a handful of documentaries emerged: One set wanted to go against the goals of the "Race to the Top" campaign for better testing scores in charters. "Race to Nowhere: The Dark Side of America's Achievement Culture" (www .racetonowhere.com) was produced by a frustrated parent who critiques the pressures felt by students and teachers in an audit culture of high-stakes testing. Tavis Smiley, a well-known radio host for PBS, felt uncomfortable with the objectives of 'Race to the Top'. In a conversation with Canada, Smiley stated: "'Race to the Top'...disturbs me: One, Education, pardon my English, ain't a race. It's not a race; it's a guarantee. Every kid in this country ought to have access to an equal, high quality education. The very notion of a race to the top means by definition that somebody's going to win and somebody's going to lose" ("Geoffrey Canada; Davis Guggenheim 9/28/10"). Other outlets have expressed their concern over treating the national education agenda like a casino jackpot of governance, rewarding those who exceed expectations while leaving losers broke and hopeless. This kind of approach is not healthy because like the 'No Child Left behind Act,' children are indeed left behind. Schools that do not perform well are reprimanded, however, it's the children who really loose. Other documentaries took an impartial stance in deliberating the issues of the public education system: "The Education They Deserve" focuses on the inequities between sub-urban and city schools in Chicago. It is available online at (www.unitedwelearnil.org). Another film, "From August to June," directed by the husband of a veteran open classroom teacher, addresses the importance of educating the whole child (www.augusttojune.com).

Counter-narratives definitely invite audiences and those concerned with issues of public education to view their side of the story. Many are encouraged to participate in forums, chat groups, and Facebook pages. However, *Waiting for Superman* is not behind in promoting audience feedback and involvement. Once the film ends, visitors are encouraged by the ending credits to visit their website (waitingforsuperman.com). If the viewer visits that site, they can engage in the film's public discourse. They have the option to view the film's mission statement, to become active participants by "taking action," and joining the "debate." Other functions include watching videos by the films main leaders. In the film's final credits, audience members are also encouraged to text "POSSIBLE" to a six-digit number and instructed to visit the film's website. Who is the "you" at whom these credits are directed? What "movement" is the film urging "me" to join? Even with their flaws and difficulties acknowledged, are public schools not already a communal endeavor in which we all are or should be engaged as community members, professional educators, and laypeople alike? And who is the omnipotent "we" that seems to know what works to create great schools? (Apple, 374). Given the films supporters, backers, financiers, and affiliates, it appears that the "we" Guggenheim is addressing are private organizations, financial investors, and venture capitalists.

A large amount of donations poured into charters are given by these 'financial' backers. Many of these philanthropists want to apply their experiences in the private sector to the education system. In result, the founders of many charters are more concerned with portfolio than pedagogy; kids are now being treated like stock exchange and investment. Henry Giroux, Global Television Network Chair at McMaster University, was upset about the emphasis on "education producing a product, as if it were designed simply to produce durable goods,'' saying it ''does nothing more than justify its treatment as a machine to be repaired rather than a complex social institution made up of living, breathing human beings.'' (Dubner, 120).The sad truth is that charter schools have become big business today. Wealthy investors and major banks have since been making windfall profits by employing a little-known federal

tax break to finance new charter-school construction. The program, the New Markets Tax Credit, is so lucrative that a lender who uses it can almost double his money in seven years (Gonzalez). A loophole exists, and bankers and venture capitalists are banking in big bucks by investing in charters; some can even double their investment within a seven-year period by receiving a federal tax credit. Guggenheim does not discuss the financing of charters because he doesn't feel like it is an important issue; however, this should be addressed because charters have a huge advantage over public schools. With such profits going to charters and venture capitalists, charters are able to invest in longer school days and specialized teaching methods (computers that track grades and forecasting). However, according to the faculty of many charters, a good chunk of the money is not poured into their pockets; most of the money given is spent on building expenses. In some charters, including Green Tech High Charter School, in Albany, New York, rent has stepped up from $443,000 to $487,000 (Gonzalez). Much can be said about the amount of money poured into charter schools and where that money is going, but the figureheads providing this money are worth looking at. Venture philanthropists such as Bill Gates are part of the wealthy class that wants to re-vamp the education system. They are focused on curriculum standards, longer school days and years, and improved teacher quality. Philanthropists tend to favor competition, standardization, and high stakes accountability (Scott, 113-114). They believe that charter schools are vital, but their growth is being hampered by the charter school cap being too low, the teacher unions resisting charters, and the lack of quality management. Venture philanthropists believe that educational reform can improve testing results, and the best way to achieve this is to replicate the models of private businesses. Management organizations have taken a leading role in starting and organizing charters. These groups attract investors because they can replicate their successful models. Charters schools now resemble the U.S. economy – becoming more privatized. Although there has been progress in racial inequalities, philanthropists have not addressed race, socioeconomic status, and the lack of fundamental resources (Scott, 118).

With all the money being poured to charters, it is surprising that philanthropists haven't addressed these factors. Charter funding in the amounts of $5 billion from Bill and Malinda Gates and $325 million from JPMorgan Chase are astounding (Dingerson, 130). If there is such momentum on the behalf of wealthy investors to "help" improve schools, how might their resources be better used in terms of addressing school funding formulas and corresponding policies in health care, housing, transportation, and labor (Apple, 376)? It may be difficult to track the ways money is spent if a stipend existed, however, isn't it worth exploring? Some could argue that a stipend would be no different from welfare or government 'help'; however, this situation is a little different because the parents of these kids are more involved than the parents in regular public schools. These parents are unsatisfied with the failing education system and will stop at nothing until their kids succeed.

When it comes to financing and being a huge influence in charter reforms, Bill Gates is the nations' true school superintendent. Venture philanthropists such as Bill Gates have a major influence on how charters are run. For example, Bill has the ability to create MO's (Management Organizations) or find them to run charter schools. Instead of using seasoned principals from public schools, MO's will hire young and supple staff from the likings of Teach for America to run the schools (Scott, 113-115). Philanthropists are not the only ones interested in hiring young professionals with little pedagogical experience to run their schools: Chancellor Michelle Rhee, along with Teach for America alumni, promised that in 2010, among the 700 other teachers who failed to perform adequately under the evaluation measures; a good size would be packing their bags soon. Of the current workforce, almost 40% entered since her arrival, 120 of which were placed through Teach for America in the last school year alone (Dingerson, 140). Teach for America and the Black Alliance for Educational Options had philanthropic support but now receive federal funding just like charter schools (Scott, 123). With the move towards hiring professionals with little teaching experience, it seems like the charter school reforms are less concerned with educational experience than they are with young professionals running

and teaching schools. With Rhee's huge involvement in charters and union eradication, Teach for America will be a primary source for extracting young teachers.

The heroes of this film are Michelle Rhee and Geoffrey Canada, with a brief cameo of the charter superintendent himself, Bill Gates. Guggenheim documents their successes but pays a little attention to their failures. Musical cues, camera angles, and the length of time spent with "reformers" like Rhee and Canada make it clear that theirs is the perspective the audience should take. Critics of these figures, particularly those in opposition to Rhee, are shown protesting and ranting in news segment clips or in abbreviated interviews like those with Weingarten. And, though they exist, examples of successful public schools and their many dedicated teachers are nowhere to be seen (Apple, 371). Michelle Rhee, prior to her office as chancellor, only had three years experience under her belt; however, she would persuade Mayor Fenty to join her team of educational reformers. A bachelor's degree in government from Cornell University and a master's in public policy from Harvard University earned Rhee, also a Teach for America alumni, great respect among board members. She was a topic of major controversy because she was cut-throat and radical. By July of 2008, according to some reports (neither DCPS nor the Washington Teachers' Union will release actual numbers); Rhee had fired 250 teachers and 500 teachers' aides, avoiding union due-process rules by utilizing the 'highly qualified' certification requirements of the federal "No Child Left Behind Act" (Dingerson, 120). This is why she was hired, according to Fenty: "I was impressed on every level with Michelle: her intellect, sense of urgency and management acumen.'' (Nakumura, 1). Rhee's reputation would come tumbling down when accusations and 'evidence' were found of her cheating on standardized tests in her school districts (Gillum, 2). She would also be fired as Washington D.C's chancellor.

Geoffrey Canada, the film's most prominent figure, is most known for his role as a charter reformer. He is the CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone, and he can be seen in other documentaries similar to *Waiting for Superman*, including *Fair Game? (*2010) and *The Lottery (*2010). It is hard to resist

Canada's confidence, charms, and convictions. He is, after all, seen as a hero, who unlike many of the venture philanthropists and many reformers can relate to the issues of the brown kids depicted throughout the film. His school would later be replicated across the nation in twenty communities. These ''Promise Neighborhoods'' would be funneled by a $200 million grant as part of the 2011 fiscal budget (Giroux). Canada can't see why the debate over charter schools receives public recognition at all, saying recently: ''Folks are absolutely furious that we want to innovate. 'This guy wants to say public schools are failing!' Well, they are. 'He wants to say some teachers are lousy and should be fired.' Well, they are and they should be. The fact that people get mad when you say that stuff, it's amazing to me. People have no intention of having this business change. None'' (Heilemann, New York Magazine). Canada is also known for his strict policies including suit and ties, uniforms for children, and precision. In the film, he tells one child to tuck in his shirt, insinuating that his schools is not a playground. Unlike Rhee, Canada hasn't rallied up a large amount of critical hatred. His main critics are unimpressed by his utter disdain towards unions. He and Obama both have been criticized by their promotion of 'Race to the Top' campaigns. The film *Waiting for Superman* can be seen as a campaign piece rather than a well sought out educational film. Perhaps, the film's greatest achievement is that it raised more questions than answers, offering a more critical response towards closing the achievement gap.

A film like "*Waiting for Superman*" is, indeed, ultimately effective at starting conversations. However, this conversation isn't really a valid one. For one, the film draws conclusions for the audience, proposing that charters (without the side of public schools) are clearly the right choice for radical change. Unfortunately, the typical viewer may not recognize the irresponsible way in which he presents such "facts." However, it might be that degree of objectivity that makes him so effective at identifying the major symptoms of educational malfeasance, which he does thoughtfully and thoroughly. Even with the film's flaws, there is something to be learned. Dedicated parents produce the urgency for change, and in many cases, change is accomplished. Through its visual codes, absent presences, lack of respect

for the hard work of teachers, demonization of teacher's unions as the ultimate source of our educational problems, failure to deal with the racial structures of this society, and its refusal to address structural sources of income inequality and the fundamentally flawed tax system in this nation, director Davis Guggenheim and producer Leslie Chilcott deliver our schools to some of the very same ideological and economic movements about which there are justifiable worries (Apple, 379). The film's solution to closing the achievement gap is admirable and exceptional in some cases, (one out of five charters perform better than public schools) but the solution is deeply flawed and not well sought out.

The focus on the symptoms of social inequality (prisons) rather than its root causes (social class, race, institutionalized forms of racism) remains the film's biggest flaw, and a prominent reason why public schools in general tend to fall short in producing 'significant' results. Although the film has only grossed US $6 million upon its release (MTV NEWS), it has generated enormous buzz and is affective as a 'conversation starter. 'However, what we need now is more counter-narratives, a rise in conversation amongst community members, and more substantial facts in regards to charters. This will help develop a clearer analysis and strategy towards charter reform.

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