As I write this, it is the autumn of 2010 and we are all, apparently, waiting for Superman! *Waiting for Superman* is the title of a documentary that is being released this fall that has been getting much attention. In fact, this film seemed to crowd out all the other films playing at my local multiplex recently. I had gone there to view another one of the popular films this autumn—*The Social Network*. This film also has some ties to education that I’ll discuss later.

When I walked into the box office to buy my ticket for the film that chronicles (some say, fictionalizes) the start-up of Facebook, I was amazed to see what appeared to be children’s drawings tacked up all over the walls and windows. When I walked into the concession area, I saw what looked like a huge cardboard yellow school bus with cartoon-like figures of children popping up in the windows. I soon realized that these were not real pieces of artwork created by children, but faux kiddie art, all part of a marketing campaign to sell the coming attraction—*Waiting for Superman*. The entire lobby had been transformed into what seemed like an elementary classroom, complete with gold stars affixed to every visible surface. There was even some kind of appeal to give support to the children who were apparently at risk by our current public school system with a website that allowed for donations. So the film distributors were able to make us feel good about helping at the same time they were selling their film.

I was able to see the documentary a few days later, and I was underwhelmed by it. It reminded me that I had seen another intersection of the Superman film and Facebook. I had happened upon the episode of *Oprah* in which Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, announced that he plans to give $100 million to the Newark public school system. During that hour-long broadcast, all the guests, including the mayor of Newark and the governor of New Jersey, provided a litany of the failures of the public schools. The main criticism focused on teacher incompetence. This was a major theme of *Waiting for Superman*, as well, with blasts against tenure and teachers’ unions. In the documentary, there were the now well-known “undercover” shots of the teachers waiting for disciplinary hearings in the New York City schools who are forced to show up each day in a holding pen somewhere, sleeping the day away.

What bothered me most about the film (as well as the *Oprah* episode) was that there were no “solutions” suggested. It was like sitting through a 90-minute documentary on how awful heart disease is with very little specifics on how one might fight heart disease. (It’s all the nurses’ union’s fault!) And *Waiting for Superman* doesn’t have a happy ending. The pay-off montage at the end of the film cuts among several different lotteries going on to determine which students will get to be admitted to the various charter schools portrayed in the film. The odds are against the kids as, in each of these situations, there are far more families interested in attending the schools than there are seats. We are left to be outraged as most of the kids walk away as education lottery losers.
There is a kind of implied “hero” in the film, however. It is a memory of Geoffrey Canada, in fact, that gives the film its title. He tells a story about being a child and finding out from his mother that Superman is a fictional character. It was a profound realization to him as a child, and presumably a motivating realization to him as an adult; if there is no Superman to help humanity, he thought, it would be up to him and the Harlem Children’s Zone to help the kids of Harlem, one block at a time. It is certainly not my desire to criticize such a noble notion. And it is significant to me that Canada has been trained and has experience as a classroom teacher.

But the implied hero of the film is never really fully unmasked. We are led to believe that there are some amazing things going on in these charter schools, and we see clips of uniformed kids sitting in rows listening to their teachers. But what exactly are they doing that is so great? What are Superman’s secrets? We only get three real specific answers during the film. One aspect of these schools’ successes, predictably, is that charter schools can fire incompetent teachers more quickly than can schools in which there are teachers’ unions. The film doesn’t explain at all how these schools determine how to evaluate teachers, but the bottom line is that they can apparently get rid of “dead weight” more quickly. The second idea that is briefly described is that (some) of these schools don’t believe in tracking students. There are many educators I know who would agree with this principle. There is no explanation of how they meet the needs of all students, however, in an untracked environment. There is just a proud statement on the part of a principal that all kids are held to the same standard. Period. Problem solved! Finally, in a brief profile of the KIPP schools, they show the same video clip I’ve seen every time the KIPP schools are described—the “teacher across the hall” from the KIPP founders when they were teaching in the public schools (interestingly) who created rap songs to teach multiplication facts. There is the same clip played of the teacher frozen in time standing at the blackboard while the kids chant the rhymes she’s created with little explanation made, from a human learning perspective, as to why this might be an effective teaching strategy.

In 102 minutes, these were the only specific examples that I could see about what these supposedly exemplary schools are doing that others should emulate. (There is one more, but I don’t think it really counts—the filmmakers completely advocate the idea that we should have a longer school day and more school days in the school year. I don’t see this as really counting, because it doesn’t really speak to the content of the school day.)

But if we’re all waiting for Superman, shouldn’t we have some notion of what he’s going to be doing? All we are to determine, from the selected clips we’re shown is that a very old fashioned teacher-directed, textbook dependent curriculum and instruction system is the “superman” we’ve all been waiting for.

I’m guessing that the teachers described in this book probably wouldn’t be interested in help from such a retro “superman.” I’m under the assumption that if such a superman showed up at their doors, they’d think twice before letting him in. Many of us interested in uses of new media in schools would actually view the desks in rows portrayed in this film without a computer in sight as actually putting those students “at risk” just as much as our supposedly sinister public schools do. Many educators are increasingly coming to terms with the fact that kids are reading more minutes a day from a screen than they are from a page. These new-literacies teachers are taking schools in directions that are quite different from the recitation model that seems never to be out of style with many charter school proponents, even as it continues to bear almost no resemblance to the ways we humans read, write, and interact on a daily basis. Sure, it may lead to increased test scores (although, even the filmmakers point out, this isn’t universal), but what resemblance do these tests bear, anyway, to the “real world” in which such concrete “answers” are just a keystroke away?
The teachers, professors, and community leaders who have contributed to this book are moving away from a call-and-response model of de-contextualized “fact checking” to a way of teaching that is becoming more and more integrated with life outside of schools. Whether it’s working on community-based projects, participating in e-mentoring, or building bridges between the educational silos that have been so separate, these educators are changing the conversation. These kinds of visionary educators are realizing that school doesn’t have to be divorced from our lives after school, that, while social media can in some cases be isolating, these new forms of representation can also break down walls that cordon us off and keep schools artificial and contrived. The writers contributing to this book are working across international, political, and institutional boundaries to identify creative and resourceful strategies for promoting collaboration between higher education and the communities it serves beyond the classroom.

Interestingly, the other film that I saw at the multiplex, The Social Network, even while it was set in an institution of learning—Harvard University—contained only one scene set in a classroom. And in this one scene, the lead character, Mark Zuckerberg, stalks out of the class after showing up the professor who dares to call on him when he thinks Zuckerberg isn’t paying attention. Indeed, such a teacher-driven environment is portrayed as hopelessly irrelevant to the life of such a genius, who must retreat to a dorm room to create the platform that will grow to 500 million users. An interesting mission like creating Facebook certainly couldn’t be done within the “old school” lecture hall. So Zuckerberg had to leave and, ultimately, he never graduated. To his credit, he is now pumping millions of dollars into a public school system. One can only hope that some of the Newark teachers will read this book. Make no mistake, it would be a great thing if more of the Newark kids get to graduate and go on to college. But it would be sad if they emerge in their uniforms into a world that is unrecognizable to them. They would end up winning the lottery, but losing their relevancy. They would end up, like Canada, realizing that Superman is fictional but without the abilities and experiences to move forward. Unless, of course, they’ve learned what they need to learn beyond the schoolroom door.

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