

# School, Activism and Politics at the Movies: Educator Reactions to the Film *Waiting for “Superman”*

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**Context:** *The documentary film about U.S. education reform, Waiting for “Superman,” was met with acclaim and controversy when released to theaters in 2010, and again when launching its grassroots “host a screening” campaign in 2011. The campaign ran concurrent with 2011 state legislative sessions, during which several states (e.g., Ohio, Indiana, New Jersey, and Wisconsin) voted on education reform bills regarding teacher merit pay, probationary teacher contracts, school vouchers, changes to the school funding formula, charter school funding, and limiting teachers’ (and public workers’) collective bargaining rights—all issues touched on in the film.*

**Purpose:** *To shed light on the relationship between popular media, public opinion, and social action regarding education, I examine responses to Waiting for “Superman” across different viewer demographics and relate responses to educational policy stances. The following research questions are considered: 1. Why did people watch Waiting for “Superman”? 2. How did different education stakeholders (preservice teachers, current teachers, academics, community members, etc.) react to the film? Were some groups more likely to accept, negotiate with, or oppose the film’s message? 3. What role, if any, did the film play in viewers’ stances on education reform or intention to take social action in the education reform movement?*

**Participants:** *Participants include 168 self-selected audience members attending free public film screenings at a midwestern university.*

**Research Design:** *Mixed methods research design compares audiences’ descriptive statistics alongside open-ended survey responses and interview data.*

**Results:** *Viewers were majority young and female. Most attended because they were interested in the topic, wanted to learn more, or came with a friend. Audience responses were complex and nuanced, i.e., 38% volunteered positive reactions to the film and 30% criticized*

*it in some way (not mutually exclusive). Emotional reactions were common (38%). Audience members tended to respond to the film based on their direct prior experience (or lack thereof) with the U.S. public education system. The majority of current teachers in the audience chose not to participate in the study, perhaps because of the contentious political climate. Fifteen percent of audience members were “inspired” to act after viewing, and half of those were preservice teachers, but none were current teachers.*

**Conclusions:** *In vilifying teachers’ unions, thereby marginalizing some great teachers, the film’s producers may have missed the chance to effect lasting change in the education system. While potentially polarizing, popular film may be an effective way to engage preservice teachers in complex education topics. Contextualizing discussion with a multiperspective panel afterward is recommended.*

Are you *Waiting for “Superman”* or are you *NOT Waiting for “Superman”* (2011a)? This question draws a line in the sand and dares those actively involved in public education and in education reform to choose a side, often with very real political and professional implications. It also leaves those new to the game—namely, soon-to-be teachers—wondering which team they’ll eventually join. This research examines audience reactions to the film in order to explore the impact popular media texts have on public discourse and opinion on education reform.

#### THE FEATURE FILM: TIMING A CAMPAIGN FOR CHANGE

*Waiting for “Superman”* is a 2010 documentary film directed by Davis Guggenheim (*An Inconvenient Truth*) that follows five American children attempting to secure placements at academically successful charter schools through a lottery system. Through interviews and vignettes of children’s school experiences, the film reasons that better education for children means giving parents more options and, currently, there aren’t enough magnet or charter schools. Guggenheim argues that more choices among schools will raise standards and, in turn, make us more globally competitive (e.g., the United States used to be first in educational tests, but now ranks 25th out of 30 industrialized nations in math). The film opened in theaters in the United States on a limited release basis in fall 2010. It gained a wider audience when it was released to DVD in February 2011 and its producers launched a “host a DVD house party” campaign to ignite the “true engine for change at the local grassroots level,” as Michelle Rhee put it via a promotional video at <http://www.waitingforsuperman.com/action/dvd> (Rhee, 2011). That “change” seemed intentionally aimed at changing education policy. The film’s DVD release coincided with springtime state legislative sessions, including the Indiana General Assembly (2011) and legislative sessions in Wisconsin, New Jersey, and Ohio. All of these state congresses were considering

drastic education reform bills during the 2011 legislative session, and teacher rallies broke out in several states. This made the film more controversial because it addressed issues related to several education reform bills on the docket regarding teacher merit pay, probationary teacher contracts, school vouchers, changes to the school funding formula, charter school funding, and limiting teachers' (and public workers') collective bargaining rights (Simpson, 2011). The intersection of film, politics, schooling, and social action has a history, and has strengthened, transformed, and proliferated in recent years.

#### WAITING FOR "SUPERMAN" SYNOPSIS

At the beginning of the film, Guggenheim drives past three public "failing schools" to drop his children off at a private school. He introduces children whose parents don't have similar options: Anthony, a fifth grader living with his grandmother in Washington, DC; and Daisy, a fifth grader in Los Angeles, CA. He interviews Geoffrey Canada (Harlem Children's Zone), who dodged a "failure factory" school in Harlem, graduated from Harvard, and returned to his neighborhood to change the schools, only to "run into this system" that slowed reform. Spliced into the interview are presidents from Johnson to Reagan to Clinton to Bush making education reform speeches. Next, we meet Francisco, a first grader in the Bronx, and Bianca, a kindergartener in Harlem.

How bad are the schools? Since 2001, *No Child Left Behind* was supposed to raise achievement by testing students. But only 18% of Alaska's students are proficient in math, only 30% in New Jersey, 40% in New York, and so on. Experts explain a source of this problem: Feeder schools are notoriously terrible "dropout factories." Guggenheim narrates: "We used to blame failing neighborhoods for failing schools, but now reformers think it's the other way around." Anthony in D.C. goes to Sousa, an "academic sinkhole." We meet Michelle Rhee, D.C. Public Schools Chancellor who knows "kids are getting a crappy education." Rhee was given freedom by DC Mayor Adrian Fenty to close failing schools and fire incompetent teachers. The film says teachers are also part of the problem. An expert explains students with a good teacher can progress three times more than students with a poor teacher, covering 150% of educational standards in a year instead of 50%. We see how tenure protects some bad teachers. Randi Weingarten, American Federation of Teachers president, says unions began because female teachers' rights were being abused. But now, teachers unions are holding back positive reforms. Teachers' evaluation and due process are cumbersome for administrators. Bad teachers are so hard to fire that each year principals do a "dance of the lemons" to trade them to other schools.

Next, the film shows examples of what reformers can do, given freedom. Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone provides social services and a “birth to college” system to support high graduation rates. Rhee fired 30 principals and 100 central office personnel as parents protested. Even suburban schools aren’t preparing students. We meet Emily, an eighth grader in Silicon Valley who would rather enter a charter school lottery because her wealthy suburban school will track her into remedial classes since she is a poor test taker. Bill Gates comments on the global competitive importance of schools. At the end of the film, we see families waiting to find out if their child will be chosen in the lottery for their charter school (screaming if they are chosen or crying if they are not). Only Anthony is offered a spot on the waitlist. The film concludes with Rhee, Gates, and Canada saying, “It’ll take a lot of outrage . . . do we have the fortitude for change? . . . education is the way out (of poverty).” During the closing credits, viewers are prompted by words on the screen to “get involved” by visiting the website or texting to a given number.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW: MOVIES THAT ASPIRE TO TEACH AND INSPIRE

Viewing movies about education to “read” societal norms and education policy implications is nothing new. Popular culture and film scholar Rob Edelman analyzed movies dating back to the 1930s for stereotypical depictions of teachers (Edelman, 1983). More recently, cultural studies scholar David Saltmarsh analyzed how three movies about heroic teachers (*Stand and Deliver*, *Dangerous Minds*, and *Freedom Writers*) reflected and challenged cultural normative practices in the United States regarding public education, intersecting with popular notions of schooling, pedagogical stances, and policy documents such as *A Nation at Risk* and *No Child Left Behind* (Saltmarsh, 2011). Education and cultural studies scholars Michael Apple and Kate Swalwell conducted a textual analysis on the movie *Waiting for “Superman,”* concluding that its production is power-ridden, its contents are “simplistic,” and it “(starts) the wrong conversations” about education issues for a wider audience (Swalwell & Apple, 2011). And whether they are about education or not, movies and other forms of popular media often serve as “teaching tools” for their audiences. bell hooks (1996) noted the power of movies in informal learning situations:

Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of the filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned. . . . Movies not only provide a narrative for

specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues. (p. 3)

*Waiting for “Superman”* is not only a movie that intends to teach and create dialogue (TakePart LLC & Participant Media, 2010); it is an example of an ostensibly neutral genre: a nonfiction, documentary film. Media studies scholar Jill Godmilow would likely categorize this film as a “liberal documentary” (Godmilow, 1999) because of its emphasis on describing social problems in a relatively simplistic form to, she would argue, “address and entertain educated middle and upper-middle class audiences—audiences of persons who come to the documentary cinema to learn about the world and, perhaps, to get fired up about something” (p. 91). Godmilow viewed the liberal documentary as “an inadequate form—a relatively useless cultural product, especially for political change” (p. 91). She went on to contend that

its basic strategy is description, and it makes arguments by organizing visual evidence, expressive local testimony and expert technical testimony into a deceptively satisfying emotional form. These standard filmic conventions do little to inform the audience of its own role in socially oppressive relationships and conditions, or to rouse the audience from its implicit complacency with the status quo. (p. 91)

Since Godmilow wrote about the features of a “liberal documentary” in 1999, these textual forms have morphed. Today, such texts are often more intentionally packaged and marketed to extend beyond a single viewing and promote grassroots and digital campaigns for social change (see Appendix A). This is true in the case of *Waiting for “Superman”*: it is a documentary film nested within a larger strategic campaign for social change and policy reform packaged by TakePart LLC and Participant Media (2010) (see also, [www.takepart.com](http://www.takepart.com) and [www.participantmedia.com](http://www.participantmedia.com)). To become even more strategic about social action promotion, Participant Media and *Waiting for “Superman”* are currently partnering with researchers at the University of Southern California and the Annenberg Foundation to survey viewers (and potential viewers) online about which socially conscious films (both fictional and documentary) they like to watch, and why (see [https://uscannenberg.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_1SbADOMR2PjoIO8](https://uscannenberg.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_1SbADOMR2PjoIO8) retrieved from the *Waiting for “Superman”* official website).

The *Superman* “package” currently includes the website; an active social media feed through Facebook, Twitter, and email blasts; the

documentary film; the book; and “host a screening” promotional kits, which are free to the public. The “host a screening” kits include bumper stickers, prestamped invitation postcards, a movie poster, and microwave popcorn. The film’s producers clearly strive to inspire viewers to do something about the problems in public education by encouraging nationwide public viewing parties to spread the film’s message (TakePart LLC & Participant Media, 2010, 2011) and by providing resources for “action” such as scripts for contacting legislatures or lists of appropriate advocacy groups to become involved with or donate money to (Guggenheim, 2010; Swalwell & Apple, 2011).

There has been a proliferation of popular documentary films on U.S. education reform in the past five years addressing economic and social disparities (e.g., *Waiting for “Superman,” Race to Nowhere, Bully, The Experiment, The Cartel, American Teacher, and The Lottery*; see also *Won’t Back Down*), packaged with similar accompanying websites and social action campaigns aimed at effecting long-term systemic change (Abeles & Congoon, 2010; Barnz, 2012; Bowdon, 2009; Guggenheim, 2010; Hirsch, 2011; Lemoine, 2011; Roth & McGinn, 2011; Sackler, 2010). These films continue to make rounds via grassroots screening efforts and social media outreach today. How effective are they at teaching, inspiring, and recruiting audiences and generating change? Understanding the answer to this question requires looking more deeply at audience response.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AUDIENCE RECEPTION THEORY

*Waiting for “Superman”* is a documentary film intentionally designed to reach out to audiences and invite them to engage in social change and support education reform. The film’s director/producers designed the film in relation to politics, funding sources, activist discourse, and public education rhetoric to represent a specific, “preferred” point of view (Morley, 1983; Ravitch, 2010; Swalwell & Apple, 2011). Nevertheless, there may be no one purely “autonomous” meaning to the film (Morley, 1983; Street, 1985), and the producers don’t get the final say in the meaning-making process. Audience reception theory (Ang, 1991; Buckingham, 1994) acknowledges and privileges the fact that audience members bring their own diverse experiences, attitudes, and ways of making meaning for themselves and as a group viewing (and later, perhaps, discussing) film together (Hall, 1973; Morley, 1983). And, prominent social and political discourses (in this case, the public discourse around education reform) can also play a part in meaning making. A “media panic” (Buckingham, 1994) can develop within public discourse if a simplified version of an issue (e.g., education reform) is taken up and perpetuated in the media,

causing the public to polarize without engaging in the issue fully. So, as these factors—the producers’ intentions, the audience’s experience and background, the political climate, the tone of a screening event, discussion panelists’ comments, and the film itself—overlap and inform one another, a hybrid dialogue forms (Bakhtin, 1986) and meaning making occurs.

Media scholar David Morley, a pioneer in studies on audience differentiation, told us that audience members generally “make meaning” of a film by interpreting it in one of three ways: they fully accept the film’s “preferred” message, accept the film’s message broadly but modify or partially alter it to *negotiate a new meaning*, or *directly oppose* the film’s message after viewing (Morley, 1983). Each type of viewer response—acceptance, negotiation, or opposition—is tied to political and social implications.

When *Waiting for “Superman”* was released to DVD amidst the tumultuous 2011 state legislative session, a media panic had already been building around education reform. The film intensified this—that is, collective public reception of the film was strong and often polarizing (even without the benefit of many having actually viewed the film, and some “refusing” to do so). However, coming back to the notion of the importance of viewer reception, this study asked, “How did viewers actually respond to the film when they did view it?” and, as an extension, “How do groups interpret this film for themselves, and do the members of a certain group take up the same possible ‘reading’?” By framing this study with audience reception theory, I am able to examine viewer responses as key to inciting social action via film.

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the relationship among popular media, public opinion, and social action regarding education. Specifically, in this article, I examine initial responses to one popular education documentary, *Waiting for “Superman,”* across different viewer demographics, to relate those responses to “hot topic” issues in education and policy, and to examine how this film (and others like it) might fit into viewers’ stances on such issues. These data inform a larger study that examines the film’s impact, if any, on a range of viewers’ actions, residual responses, and opinions after a year or more has passed. Here, I have highlighted teachers’ and preservice teachers’ reactions to focus on implications for teacher education in my findings.

Because I am interested in audience reception and response to the film, my research questions are the following:

1. Why did people choose to watch *Waiting for “Superman”*?
2. How did different education stakeholders (preservice teachers, current teachers, academics, etc.) react to the film? Were some

groups more likely to accept, negotiate with, or oppose the film’s message, for example?

3. What role, if any, did the film play in viewers’ stance on or intention to take social action in the education reform movement?

## METHOD

### RESEARCHER’S ROLE IN FILM SCREENINGS

*Waiting for “Superman”* was screened at a large midwestern university sponsored by the school of education’s graduate student organization. Another student group on campus interested in education policy had been trying to arrange a screening for several months, so both groups worked together to organize and sponsor three campus film screenings with support from the school of education, a university honors college, and the university cinema. As president of the graduate student organization, I worked closely with the production company to gain a licensed copy of the film. I also worked with numerous graduate students who recruited panelists, facilitated discussion after the film, promoted the screening events, and coordinated the production aspects of hosting a viewing and moderated talk. When Teach For America recruitment staff organized a fourth screening on campus the following semester, I was invited because of my TFA alumni status, but I did not facilitate that event. I attended all four screenings as an audience member, distributed surveys, and spoke to other viewers on-site, then followed up with those interested in conducting interviews afterward via email to arrange focus group and individual reflective discussions.

### SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

The first three screenings were open to the public and advertised through campus-based outlets, as well as through the local public radio station and an email forwarded to local teacher groups. TFA recruiters promoted the fourth screening to students only during “Teach for America Week” on campus. All viewers who attended these screenings were invited to complete a survey about their reactions to the film if they wished to do so. Interviewees were selected based on the demographic information they provided in their survey responses, with current classroom teachers given the highest priority. This was done for two reasons. First, the film is about public education and stresses the importance of effective teachers, yet classroom teachers are not featured in the film as documentary subjects or interviewees. Second, because of the screenings’



location on a university campus, the majority of audience members were undergraduate students, graduate students, or professors, rather than teachers or other members of the surrounding community.

#### DATA COLLECTION

I used a variety of methods to collect data. I observed and video recorded four *Waiting for "Superman"* public movie screening/panel discussion events held between March and October in 2011, gathered field notes, and created a thick record of each event. I distributed one-page surveys to audience members (see Appendix B) prefaced with an explanation of my study, and followed up with select participants by conducting one-hour semistructured individual and focus group interviews afterward (see Appendix C). Interviews were conducted one to four weeks after each screening and scheduled at times convenient to participants whenever possible. Focus groups were homogenous according to participants' involvement in education. I kept detailed memos on themes emerging from screenings and interviews.

#### DATA ANALYSIS TOOLS

I focused most of my analysis for this article on open-ended survey responses capturing 168 viewers' "initial reactions to the film." I coded viewer reactions (Saldaña, 2009) first for demographic information (including age, sex, and involvement in education) and, in the first sweep, I looked for patterns of common responses among similar types of participants. I then combed through responses again to code for themes and topics, and continued to note any patterns. Following audience reception theory, I particularly noted comments that indicated viewer acceptance, negotiation/questioning, and opposition to the film and coded accordingly. All codes were emergent, meaning that they were derived directly from wording and themes that emerged directly from participants' comments (see Table 1). Using descriptive statistics, I identified responses that were typical from certain types of viewers (according to age, involvement in education, etc.).

### RESULTS

#### WHO ENGAGED WITH *WAITING FOR "SUPERMAN"*?

The majority of the 168 participants were young and female, reflecting the school of education student population. Survey respondents were at least 54% female ( $n=90$ ; another 14% of respondents chose not to disclose their sex). This figure mirrored whole-audience head counts, which

**Table 1. Emergent Coding Scheme for Written Survey Responses**

Type of Comment	Comment Subcategories
Comments that include a reaction to the film	“I’m critical/skeptical” . . . “this was biased” “I learned something new” “I agree with points in the film because I’ve seen it with my own eyes” “Loved it!” “The film was well made”*
Comments that include an emotional response (happy, sad, worried, upset, “heartfelt,” etc.)	Emotional response to issues in education Emotional response to the film
Comments that include a question	Question about an issue in education Question about the film “I’m unsure where to go from here”/“unsure what to do”
Comments that indicate participant is motivated/inspired to do something	---
Comments that indicate an anti-union/anti-tenure/“there is a need for reform” sentiment	---

included nonparticipants who came to watch the film as well. Participants were young, with 75% of viewers under the age of 34 years ( $n=126$ ), and almost half (46%) of the total participating audience members between ages 18 and 24 years ( $n=78$ ). The majority of participants were undergraduate (39%;  $n=66$ ) and/or preservice teachers (36%;  $n=60$ ; these categories are not mutually exclusive); there were also many graduate students who participated (35%;  $n=59$ ). Of the graduate students, 11 were international students (7% of total participants), making them less likely to have prior experience with K–12 U.S. schooling, and 38 participating grad students were *not* preservice teachers (23% of participants), making them *more* likely to have prior classroom teaching experience if they were graduate students in the field of education. Similarly, the 14 professors/higher education administrators in the field of education who participated were also more likely to have prior classroom teaching experience. However, very few participants were professors (8%) or community members (8%), and very few were current teachers (4%;  $n=7$ ) or parents (2%;  $n=4$ ).

#### WHY DID PEOPLE WATCH AND ENGAGE WITH *WAITING FOR “SUPERMAN”*?

The majority of participant audience members (79%) attended because they wanted to hear others’ views, they were interested in the topic, or

both, indicating that they came because they wanted to make more sense of issues in the film. Many participant viewers (25%) came with a friend, were invited personally, or both, which means they attended for social or interpersonal reasons. Only 14 participants (8% of total respondents) wanted to share their personal views at screening events, and of these, half were preservice teachers and only one was a current classroom teacher. It is important to note that 22% of participants ( $n=38$ ) attended a screening in part because it was credit or a requirement for class, rather than purely out of personal interest in the topic. This element of compulsion may have prepared some participants to be more readily accepting of the film's claims initially if it was billed as an "informational" event tied to classroom activity, though not necessarily, because they also could have been asked to view the film critically by their instructors. There is no way to verify this. And further, these participants may have engaged in some "teacher pleasing" in their survey responses since I am an undergraduate instructor. I make this point only to speculate on possible limitations of my survey instrument.

#### HOW DID THE PARTICIPANT GROUP COLLECTIVELY REACT TO VIEWING THE FILM?

Emotional reactions to the film were common: 38% of total audience participants ( $n=63$ ) volunteered some sort of emotional response, but half of those (31 out of 63) were the youngest viewers (ages 18–24 years).

A large portion of participants (38%) had positive reactions to viewing the film: they said they agreed with the film, indicated they had learned something new, and/or "loved" the film. But in addition, many participants (30%) were voluntarily explicitly skeptical or critical of aspects of the film's message. However, such reactions were not mutually exclusive, and layered responses to the film were often expressed. For example, 11% of all viewers said they loved it, learned something from it, and/or thought the film was well made, yet also qualified their comments with criticality and skepticism. See Table 2 for response themes and evidence of reflection tempered with critique. As one viewer wrote, "Great story— very motivational, has me inspired. However, it could have been less political, particularly in the end titles." Another said, "Very moving, skeptical of his endless praise for charter schools." And, another saw it as "an interesting documentary that is excessively critical of unions and not enough focus on socio-economic change."

In a similar example of this, 15% of viewers either agreed with the film because they had seen similar problems in education "with their own eyes," or indicated they thought there was a clear need for reform;

**Table 2. Viewer Reactions to the Film**

<b>Initial Reaction to the Film Via Survey Comments</b>	<b>Number out of the Total (N=168)</b>	<b>Percentage of Survey Respondents Represented</b>	<b>Number That Qualified This View With Skepticism</b>
Emotional response	63	38%	
“I’m critical/skeptical”	50	30%	
“I learned something new”	34	20%	
“Loved it!”	26	15%	12 (46%)
“The film was well made”*	19	11%	---
Anti-tenure/anti-union/“I agree there is a need for reform”	18	11%	6 (33%)
“I agree with the film because I’ve seen similar problems in education with my own eyes”**	11	7%	4 (36%)

*Notes.* Categories are not mutually exclusive.

\* Refers to cinematography.

\*\* Of these participants, only two indicated that they came to the event specifically to share their views.

yet 38% (10/26) of these qualified this stance (and negotiated their own meaning) by questioning other aspects of the film’s message. In one participant’s words:

I enjoyed its approach and vision, but I’m still skeptical of the “solution” it offers. Teachers were generalized and only given one voice— through the unions. The filmmaker didn’t give individual teachers, good and “lemons”— a chance to speak. I’m not saying they aren’t the problems, but since the filmmaker gave everyone else— students, parents, superintendents, reformers— a voice, it would have been nice to hear more of what teachers had to say. There’s a reason they need protection with the union, but that doesn’t mean they have a common, simplistic, and self-ish voice.

#### HOW DID DIFFERENT POPULATIONS OF EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS REACT TO A VIEWING OF THE FILM?

Different populations of viewers reacted to the film in distinct ways depending on their background and experience with the education system, as described below.

## COMPLEX AND NUANCED AUDIENCE RECEPTION

An important finding in this work is the documented complexity and qualified nature of viewers' responses to the film. Viewers were more likely to have layered responses rather than one-dimensional responses initially and, unsurprisingly, given the chance to expound on their initial reactions in follow-up interviews, only increased that sophistication. This signals the complex nature of many of the issues presented in the film and shows the potential for rich conversation to open up after a public viewing.

Multiple populations of education stakeholders, including preservice teachers, former teachers/current academics in the field of education, international students, and community members, tended to respond to the film based on their prior direct experience (or lack thereof) with the U.S. public education system. For example, those with direct experience working in the public education system (current teachers and former teachers; up to 29% of the total or  $n=49$  if graduate students in education who are *not* preservice teachers are assumed to have previous experience in schools) tended to view the movie most critically because they could speak out using experiences and counterexperiences as evidence. Forty-three percent of these participants ( $n=21$ ) volunteered that they were critical of aspects of the film. For example, one former teacher assessed the film like this:

If you are a literate educator, this film seems pretty basic. However, for the average citizen, the film sheds light on critical issues plaguing the public school systems. While I understand presenting all sides of the argument would undermine the purpose of the film, there were some points with charter schools that went unadvertised.

Those with less direct experience with the U.S. public education system (preservice teachers, international students, and community members not employed in the field of education; 50% of the total or  $n=84$ ) volunteered criticality only 21% of the time. These participants tended to be more accepting of the movie's claims and were most swayed by the movie's emotional message, especially if they were young. Many of these participants expressed shock, surprise, dismay, or disbelief about the issues presented. Specifically, some international students tended to express surprise to learn that the U.S. public schools had such systemic problems at all. One international student commented, "I'm surprised that the big country like the United States now is facing huge problems in public education," and another reported, "it is one of the most shocking

films I have ever seen in America.” These comments indicate that these international students have limited firsthand experience with struggling inner city U.S. public schools like those mentioned in the film and/or that their perception of the United States in general is different than the film’s portrayal.

Many undergraduate and preservice teachers, meanwhile, tended to react in a similar yet distinct manner, with a mix of intense emotion, inspiration, and confusion. They reported feeling “frustrated” and “disappointed . . . conflicted on beliefs/confidence in [the] school system” because, as one student said, “It breaks my heart that so many parents are so desperate to provide for their children.” Others in this group found the film “very inspirational and powerful,” “extremely upsetting,” “sad,” or “moving . . . emotional,” and “eye-opening.” These strong feelings were generally accompanied by questions. Many undergrad/preservice teachers felt helpless or felt they didn’t have enough experience in education to know what was true: “I do not feel that I have enough experience to say whether or not the film accurately portrays urban and charter schools,” said one, and another reported, “Not sure if I’m supposed to feel inspired to be the best teacher I can be . . . or depressed.” Of those undergrad/preservice teachers who included comments on their surveys, 73% reported feeling inspired to do something after seeing the film and were highly convinced by the film’s portrayal of the public school system’s problems overall. One repeated a central argument from the film, saying, “Teacher unions are more of a problem than a benefit,” and another echoed, “KILL THE UNIONS.” Another said, “I thought the movie provided the audience with some clear points. It is important for us to make the school days longer, have more school days, and get rid of ineffective teachers in order to provide students with a better environment for learning. Education is based around adults rather than the children,” and another wondered, “Why don’t we mimic other successful countries’ education systems?” This indicates that the film was successful in convincing and evoking inspiration from at least one important demographic group: young adults and future teachers.

By accepting and revoicing some of the claims made in the film, these undergraduate/preservice teachers demonstrated that they are entering into conversation about relevant themes and issues in education, and citing the film as a partial entry point into the public conversation.

In contrast, those that had more experience in U.S. K–12 classrooms tended to have a much more oppositional reaction to the movie. Many graduate students (50% or 14/28) and professors (36% or 5/14) in the field of education (the vast majority of whom were former teachers), parents (50% or 2/4), and current teachers (29% or 2/7) identified aspects of

the movie as one-sided, promoting an anti-union/pro-charter agenda, and overly simplistic. These respondents were more likely to list specific important factors affecting the education system that were left out of the movie. For example, one said, “It ignored every other variable contributing to student success except teachers/schools, other than mentioning ‘poverty, crime, troubled homes.’ Frustrated at absolute nature of tenure.” Another found the film “Very anti-union.” They said it “sometimes came across as a one-sided lobby for charter schools—failed to give audience a complex view into charter schooling.” Still another viewer thought the film “unfairly lumps all public schools into a group based on the public schools portrayed. Same [for portrayal of the] union and contracts—not all contracts, associations, and members are the same.” And another reported, “I find it really interesting that the movie demonizes teachers/unions without talking about the ways in which admin/district bureaucracy could actually terminate poorly performing teachers by working the eval system. The fault isn’t just the unions, but that the admin doesn’t do their part of the job.” Last, one viewer commented on the inherent complexities of politicized issues in the film:

The system is broken, and it isn’t easily fixed. It’s hard to craft policies that reflect the success stories at KIPP to Harlem children due to politics, sheer size of [the United States], and many other issues. I moved to [University Town] from D.C. where I served as a legislative assistant for education for a democratic congressman. While I think Rhee was pushing through necessary reforms, I believe she went about it entirely the wrong way. I don’t know if there would ever have been an easy way for doing what she did, but she failed to understand her constituency and the history of D.C. that I will not go into here. I think that the media makes Rhee out as a hero, but she could have done a lot more good for longer if she hadn’t been so polarizing. I also saw firsthand how “motivated” congress people can be by special interests in my former job, but it isn’t always for “bad.” I have no doubt that an extension of emergency funding for states (the majority of which went to education) under one ARRA would not have passed without pressure from the AFT and NEA. I had many conversations with interest groups during my time in the congressman’s office, and it always struck me how polarized all sides of the debate are, and how everybody thinks they have THE idea that is going to change schools in the United States. One idea isn’t going to work everywhere, it’s going to take time, and it will be difficult, but as naive as it might sound, there has to be more cooperation and less name calling.

These participants clearly speak from their personal experiences to critique the film. They have moved beyond simply attempting to digest the issues presented in the film and toward questioning some of its claims, a job made easier given their prior experiences.

But, experienced educators were not alone in questioning and critiquing the film. There were exceptions to this rule where criticality was concerned. There were undergraduate students from multiple disciplines and preservice teachers in particular who took a more critical stance—a robust 49% of those participant groups, in fact. Their critical comments tended to be broader than those made by participants with direct experience in schools. For example, one said, “I feel like they only showed the best and the worst schools. None in between. It really was good though.” Another found the film “very biased, and all of the statistics were bad for public schools.” Similarly, one viewer commented, “I thought the movie made public education look unsuccessful and private and charter schools more successful” and another wrote, “I was disappointed they didn’t mention failing charter schools.” And last, one preservice teacher reported, “I’m always wary of union-bashing rhetoric. My father is a teacher, and I don’t like the dichotomy presented of bad/effective teachers.”

Though they didn’t necessarily speak from personal experience as classroom teachers, clearly these undergraduate/preservice teachers viewed the film with a critical eye. And, when engaged in conversation and given the chance to speak more, criticality became even more evident. Those undergraduate/preservice teachers I interviewed who had little classroom experience but did have the initiative and interest in education reform to do their own research on the topic, and initiative and interest enough to take steps to set up an interview with me, tended to have more questions and criticisms with regard to the film’s presentation of the topic overall. See Table 3 for detailed viewer responses by demographic group.

#### WHAT ROLE DID THE FILM PLAY IN VIEWERS’ MOTIVATION TO SOCIAL ACTION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EDUCATION REFORM MOVEMENT?

Fifteen percent of participants ( $n=26$ ) voluntarily indicated they felt motivated, re-motivated, or inspired to do something to make a difference, help children, or improve the education system after viewing the film. For example, one said, “Makes me want to get involved more.” Another said, “I’ve renewed my reason for wanting to be a teacher and to help make a difference. Things can change.” And, another said, “What a motivational film; this should be required for all teachers to watch.” Of those,



**Table 3. Types of Reactions to the Film by Demographic Group via Written Survey Responses**

Type of Reaction	Preservice Teachers	Current Teachers	Undergraduate Students	Graduate Students	International Students	Academics	Community Members
“I’m critical/skeptical”	22%	29%	24%	50%	18%	38%	23%
Emotional	37%	29%	46%	37%	36%	7%	38%
“I learned something new”	25%	0%	26%	20%	36%	0%	23%
“Inspired”	22%	0%	23%	10%	9%	21%	8%
“Loved it!”	15%	14%	18%	15%	9%	7%	23%
“Left with questions/unsure”	12%	14%	9%	19%	18%	21%	8%
Anti-union/pro-reform sentiment	7%	14%	12%	7%	0%	14%	15%
Agree/“have seen similar problems”	5%	14%	6%	8%	0%	0%	8%

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive.

half ( $n=13$ ) were preservice teachers or other preprofessionals (such as social workers) getting ready to enter the profession (11 undergrads and 2 graduate students). Three were University faculty/staff, and only one actually currently worked in K–12 education (as a charter school administrator). Two were grad students in the field of education (and former teachers), and two were undergrads outside the field of education. Of these, three (11%) were unsure what they should do next to help, even though they wanted to make a difference in some way. Interestingly, 0% of participating teachers came away inspired.

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

To understand the potential impact of *Waiting for “Superman”* on education reform and social change in the United States, examining audience reception is telling. Audience reception theory emphasizes analyzing the

scope of audience acceptance, negotiation, and opposition in relation to a text to fully interpret its meaning (Morley, 1983). Keep in mind that like studies of students' responses to media conducted in schools (Buckingham, 1994), my participants' responses were not necessarily static or predictive of other audience members' reactions from the same demographic group (Ang, 1991). The data above demonstrates that though viewers often reacted similarly to others in their demographic group, there also is potential for a wide variety of responses from an array of education stakeholders, with many viewers explicitly engaging in meaning "negotiation" through questioning, and expressing opposition to some of the film's claims while accepting others. That said, in my study, teachers and academics as a group were the most oppositional, undergraduates and preservice teachers groups were most accepting of the film's intended message, and, overall, most audience members negotiated a slightly new meaning in some way when viewing.

What does this mean for social action? Perhaps the more engaging to viewers a film is—whether the audience agrees with all of the information presented or not—the more likely it is to inspire engagement in the topic or make a long-term impression. In other words, perhaps evoking emotions, questions (i.e., negotiations), and pushback from audience members is key to instigating social action afterward—especially if audience members can be convinced to find out more on the topic afterward through "action" resources provided. The question then becomes, if they decide to engage, will audience members engage with education reform in ways that the producers intend, or does the film have a polarizing effect?

"Silent" viewers may offer further information to consider here.

#### TEACHERS DID NOT PARTICIPATE: SALIENT EFFECTS OF THE CONTENTIOUS POLITICAL CLIMATE EVIDENT

Although current teachers were actively recruited to serve on the panels and attend the first three movie screenings as audience members, they did not make up a majority of the audience at any of the screenings. Initial teacher recruiting attempts by event organizers made it clear that engaging teachers in these events could be a challenge. First, organizers contacted the local school district's central office to arrange a community screening intended mainly for teachers. The district administrators ultimately declined to host a screening at a district school building "because of the controversial nature of the film" (Central Office administrator, personal correspondence, 2011). Next, teachers themselves were contacted and invited to speak about their perspective on discussion panels.

Through personal communications, several indicated that they were “afraid” or “reluctant” to see the film, or even “refused” to see it because of the negative rhetoric it might contain against public school teachers, which they considered “a personal attack.”

Given the adversarial, and at times hostile, political climate regarding education reform and teacher quality, the fact that teachers decided not to participate is perhaps unsurprising. Ultimately, two teachers did agree to speak on the first two panel discussions. Though other teachers may have been disinterested or hindered by other factors such as busy teacher schedules, each teacher who did consent to be interviewed for this study independently mentioned the risk associated with speaking out to some degree. They acknowledged the political turmoil regarding education reform legislation, tied it to issues presented in the movie *Waiting for “Superman,”* and largely discussed their thoughts on the reform issues in the film during our interview conversations. Terry, a teacher panelist (present at both of the first two screenings), a veteran teacher of over 30 years, agreed to participate “against [his] better judgment,” and said via survey beforehand that he “did not want to see a teacher-bashing event.” In a follow-up interview, he said he was “pleasantly surprised” that university professor panelists supported many of his views and “backed up” his experiences by refuting or challenging most of the film’s claims, and that charter school panelist representatives were more “factual” and balanced than he had expected. It seemed he had anticipated a debate format, and was pleasantly surprised by the open collaborative dialogue that resulted instead. Robin (not her real name), a veteran kindergarten teacher who agreed to speak with me, spent the majority of our interview session discussing her views about current policy reforms and expectations, and how those negatively affected the supports she wished to give her low-income students. And when Matt (not his real name), a high school computer coordinator who “feel[s] frustrated with teacher unions and politics that stand in the way of reform” tried to convince his principal, vice principal, and school librarian to see the movie, his administrators first worried it would be “school bashing.” However, after he got a copy and passed it around to interested teachers, it opened up conversations about kids who “fall through the cracks” at their high school. These teachers’ experiences with colleagues and stances with regard to the film reflect the polarized political climate regarding education issues, and reveal the role *Waiting for “Superman”* plays within that climate. So, regardless of whether their stance toward the film was positive or negative, teachers encountered anti-schools/anti-teachers discourse in relation to the film (an indication that a “media panic” may already have been in full swing).

Since the events were held on a university campus, it was not surprising that the members of the university community, including faculty, staff, and students, comprised the bulk of the audience. However, astonishingly, teacher opinion comprised a meager 4% of my survey respondents (7 out of 168). Though teachers were actively recruited to participate and my field observations indicated that several other clusters of teachers actually did attend each event—often to support a panelist who was a colleague of theirs—there was a gap between how many teachers attended and how many were actually willing to share their opinions on a survey. Of the seven teachers who did respond via survey, two were panelists already, and another two were “invited personally” to attend by other panelists. Perhaps teachers were simply disinclined to participate, just like many other viewers. But, given participating teachers’ responses, it is also possible that the controversy surrounding the film and the intense political climate with regard to teachers was so threatening that they felt uncomfortable or too attacked to speak up, even if they were present. This mirrors the risk and pressure that they may face in schools. Education reform is happening “to” many teachers, rather than “by” them. In Guggenheim’s depiction of the reform effort (2010), “great teachers are essential,” but given that he declined to highlight any teacher voices in his film, are those currently on the ground really “necessary”? Perhaps not. “Silent” teachers’ lack of response may signal *Waiting for Superman*’s polarization problem, and reveal limits for its potential to effect widespread change.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGAGING WITH SOCIAL ISSUES VIA POPULAR MEDIA

There are implications here for using popular persuasive nonfiction media to engage with education as a social issue. Popular persuasive nonfiction like “*Superman*” is an accessible way to become informed and engaged with a social issue, though particularly if viewers maintain an open, critical approach. Because it necessarily simplifies issues, it is often polarizing and politicized (Buckingham, 1994). In the case of *Waiting for Superman*, though the film’s producers may have partially succeeded in engaging a larger public audience in the issues and challenges public education faces today, they may also have contributed to polarization between groups who could potentially work together to improve public education: namely teachers’ unions, teachers themselves, administrators, charter school leaders, private funders, and policymakers.

One participant commented above, “I think that the media makes [reformer Michelle] Rhee out as a hero, but she could have done a lot

more good for longer if she hadn't been so polarizing." The *Waiting for "Superman"* producers are widely viewed as being in the same "hero camp" as Rhee, but being a polarizing figure creates limitations on effecting long-term change. In aligning the film's message with a few groups (charter school leaders, private funders, "change agent" administrators, and some policymakers) and criticizing the "opposition" and generalizing them as archetypes (namely, portraying *all* teachers unions as "evil," and inadvertently marginalizing some great teachers), the film's producers have oversimplified the problems in education in the eyes of many viewers, missed the chance to tell a fuller story, and potentially estranged opportunities to encourage collaborative efforts toward positive change. Nevertheless, given the reported impact this film had on a slice of its audience, popular persuasive nonfiction texts like "*Superman*" should not be overlooked or discounted as possibly valuable conduits to social change. Such texts can be helpful and viable tools for conveying information on social issues, and inspiring people to think, care, and maybe even act. However, when viewing "*Superman*," it is also useful to hear various stakeholders' perspectives about the film to gain a clearer picture, and use that as a starting point for constructive conversation about solutions. Further research is needed to verify whether any viewers actually acted upon their initial reports of inspiration and motivation to act, and in what ways.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

Last, there are implications here for teacher education. There are many conflicting and confusing discourses about what preservice teachers' future will be like as teachers. Using popular nonfiction multimedia (like *Waiting for "Superman"*) can be an accessible and effective way for large groups of preservice teachers to engage with issues and political discourses they might encounter in their future careers. Notably, pairing the film with a multiperspective panel discussion (i.e., a panel with public school teachers, charter school teachers, policy experts, curriculum scholars, parents, etc.) is key for creating opportunities for preservice teachers to critique, question, or confirm what they have learned through the movie by considering multiple views. Many of the preservice teachers I interviewed were eager to "continue the conversation" in class or in small focus groups because they wanted to develop their knowledge and expertise about issues introduced in the film. A caveat to this is that preservice teachers (and all audience members) will bring their own unique experiences, values, and perspectives to the conversation, and should not be thought of as "blank slates" or in need of "protection" from political discourses that arise from such discussions.

### *Limitations*

One limitation of this study was its small scope. The participants included only university graduate students, undergraduate students, professors, and support staff, as well as teachers, school administrators, and community members, mostly from the immediate midwestern community and surrounding regions, who chose to attend the movie screenings and/or panel. A few additional participants came from as far as the state capital, which is an urban area located about one hour north of the university’s community. A possible solution when conducting further research may be to recruit participants from online spaces.

Another limitation of this study had to do with participant self-selection. Within the set of viewers interested in coming to the screening, people self-selected whether or not they would complete a survey, provide narrative written feedback on their survey, or provide contact information to schedule an interview with me afterward. Related to this, audience members were coming and going freely from the screening sites, and because I wanted broad audience participation in a natural screening setting, I was not able to stop viewers to survey them both before and after the film in order to capture their prior knowledge and opinions on education reform. Having information about their attitudes and opinions both before *and* after viewing would have been valuable for exploring the direct effects the film may have had on their responses. While a more structured experimental study design might have alleviated some of these problems and gleaned interesting data, implementing such a large-scale design is not always logistically feasible. However, one example design possibility may be partnering with a local movie theater that agrees to screen a film for free, distributing surveys before and after viewing as a requirement for attending, and comparing attitudes before and after viewing; or, seeking a more captive audience within a school or classroom setting would also work.

A third limitation for this study involved time. Constrained by the confines of a university semester schedule or a public school day and calendar, those participants who were able to find time to come to a screening and, perhaps, to meet with me face-to-face afterward enjoyed the fullest representation in this study. Given these limitations, the next opportunity I have to document viewer reactions to popular nonfiction, I plan to include a more easily distributable online version of my survey, present participants with an explicit opportunity to be interviewed remotely, and possibly offer a small incentive such as a gift certificate for participation. Also, partnering with producers to couple a survey with information on the film via the official website (as a University of Southern

California research team did recently with Participant Media and *Waiting for "Superman"*) is one alternative study design that offers a possible way to reach a large group of viewers easily (though such a partnership presents unique limitations of its own).

## CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Whether *Waiting for "Superman"* has started the "wrong" conversations or not, it *has* gotten people talking about the status of public education in the United States today, and that engagement has potential value. When contextualized within socialization and tempered with multiple perspectives, the opportunity to make sense of complex issues from viewing this film is increased. And, if this study is any indication of the potential wider influence this popular documentary film could have on public opinion and policy, then the power and limitations of such texts become clearer. Those who know the topic best find its format limiting and simplistic (and should be given a platform to describe and dialogue about those views), and those who know the topic less directly join the conversation using the text as a resource to participate to some degree.

Further research is needed to determine whether viewers acted upon their initial inspiration after viewing, whether viewers retained information from the film long term, and whether the film had a lasting public impact. To gauge this, I would like to conduct a second phase of this research by distributing follow-up surveys or conducting interviews with participants who indicated that they learned something from the film or were inspired to help improve education after viewing. Researching whether participants remember aspects of the film after a year or more has passed or whether they have acted upon their inspiration in some way after watching the film, would provide a clearer picture of the impact of the film and its potential for instigating social change and/or controlling public discourse.

Meanwhile, the public conversation has continued via mass media and grassroots media outlets. *Waiting for "Superman"* has spurred the production of countertexts, including the website movement *NOT Waiting for SUPERMAN* maintained by Rethinking Schools (2011), a series of print and web-based articles and reviews, and even a counterdocumentary/grassroots campaign effort called *The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman*, initiated and funded by NYC teachers and parents (Cavanagh, Bruhn, Donlan, Scott, & Marelli, 2011). Following these collective countertext responses as they play out in a public fashion and attempt to vie for some control of public opinion and education policy is both a challenge methodologically and an interesting opportunity to watch collective critical response in action.

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APPENDIX A: NONFICTION TEXTS WITH A “TAKE ACTION” CAMPAIGN

Select list of popular persuasive nonfiction texts marketed with a “take action” campaign for grassroots social change (either as a part of the text, or through an accompanying website), by topic.

\*Denotes a documentary film; \*\*denotes a book and a film

Topic	Website
<b>Feminist Issues</b>	
<i>Miss Representation*</i>	<a href="http://www.missrepresentation.org">www.missrepresentation.org</a>
<i>The Business of Being Born*</i>	<a href="http://www.thebusinessofbeingborn.com">www.thebusinessofbeingborn.com</a>
<i>Someday Melissa*</i>	<a href="http://www.somedaymelissa.com">www.somedaymelissa.com</a>
<b>Environmental Issues</b>	
<i>Flow*</i>	<a href="http://www.flowthefilm.com">www.flowthefilm.com</a>
<i>An Inconvenient Truth**</i>	<a href="http://www.climatecrisis.net">www.climatecrisis.net</a>
<i>The Story of Stuff*</i>	<a href="http://www.storyofstuff.org/2011/11/09/action-toolkit">www.storyofstuff.org/2011/11/09/action-toolkit</a>
<i>Vanishing of the Bees*</i>	<a href="http://www.vanishingbees.com/host-a-screening">www.vanishingbees.com/host-a-screening</a>
<i>Food, Inc.*</i>	<a href="http://www.takepart.com/foodinc/action">www.takepart.com/foodinc/action</a>
<b>Education</b>	
<i>American Teacher*</i>	<a href="http://www.theteachersalaryproject.org">www.theteachersalaryproject.org</a>
<i>Waiting for “Superman”***</i>	<a href="http://www.waitingforsuperman.com/action/page/what-you-can-do">www.waitingforsuperman.com/action/page/what-you-can-do</a>
<i>We the Parents*</i>	<a href="http://www.wetheparentsfilm.com">www.wetheparentsfilm.com</a>
<i>Race to Nowhere*</i>	<a href="http://www.endtherace.org">www.endtherace.org</a>
<i>Bully**</i>	<a href="http://www.thebullyproject.com">www.thebullyproject.com</a>
<i>The Experiment*</i>	<a href="http://www.theexperimentfilm.com">www.theexperimentfilm.com</a>
<i>The Cartel*</i>	<a href="http://www.thecartelmovie.com">www.thecartelmovie.com</a>
<i>Mitchell20*</i>	<a href="http://www.mitchell20.com/get-involved">www.mitchell20.com/get-involved</a>
<i>The Inconvenient Truth About Waiting for “Superman”*</i>	<a href="http://www.waitingforsupermantruth.org">www.waitingforsupermantruth.org</a>
<b>Policy/Politics</b>	
<i>Bowling for Columbine*</i>	<a href="http://www.bowlingforcolumbine.com/involved">www.bowlingforcolumbine.com/involved</a>
<i>Fahrenheit 911*</i>	<a href="http://www.fahrenheit911.com/soldiers">www.fahrenheit911.com/soldiers</a>
<i>Sicko*</i>	<a href="http://sickothemovie.com">sickothemovie.com</a>
<i>Trouble the Water*</i>	<a href="http://www.troublethewaterfilm.com">www.troublethewaterfilm.com</a>
<b>Economy</b>	
<i>Walmart: The High Cost of Low Price*</i>	<a href="http://www.walmartmovie.com/host.php">www.walmartmovie.com/host.php</a>
<i>Made in L.A.*</i>	<a href="http://www.madeinla.com/get">www.madeinla.com/get</a>

APPENDIX B: SURVEY USED IN THE STUDY

Survey: Reactions to the film *Waiting for “Superman”*

1. What are your initial reactions to the film?

2. Why did you attend the film screening? (Check all that apply):

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Interested in the topic     | <input type="checkbox"/> Wanted to hear others' views |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Assignment/credit for class | <input type="checkbox"/> Invited personally           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wanted to share my views    | <input type="checkbox"/> Came with a friend           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____                |   |

3. How are you involved in education? (Check all that apply):

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher               | <input type="checkbox"/> Parent           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pre-service teacher   | <input type="checkbox"/> Professor        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Undergraduate student | <input type="checkbox"/> Community member |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Graduate student      | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____     |

4. Are you willing to be interviewed about your thoughts on the film at a later date? (Check all that apply):

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> No                | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, in a focus group |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, individually |  |

Age:

- |                                |                                |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 18-24 | <input type="checkbox"/> 45-54 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 25-34 | <input type="checkbox"/> 55-64 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 35-44 | <input type="checkbox"/> 65+   |

Sex:

- |                                 |                               |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Female | <input type="checkbox"/> Male |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|

(If you agree to be interviewed, please include):

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

email address: \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for your time!**

## APPENDIX C: SEMISTRUCTURED PROTOCOL FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS USED IN THE STUDY

### Topic Domain:

- A participant's reaction to watching *Waiting for "Superman"* and listening to the panel discussion afterward
- (Or, more broadly) Text consumers' motivations for choosing popular nonfiction texts; how they interact with those texts, and how they use them to communicate, make decisions, and form identity

### Lead-off Question:

- Why did you come to the film?

### Covert Categories of Interest:

- Identity formation with relation to the film and panel topics
- How the film supplies viewers with communication "ammunition"
- How real-world experience with the topic (U.S. public education) shapes the way viewers accept or reject claims made in the film
- Why viewers choose to engage with/consume certain types of (film) texts

### Possible Follow-up Questions:

1. If a friend was thinking about going to see the film and wanted to know what you thought about it, what would you say?
  - a. Can you describe your reactions to the film?
  - b. Can you describe a certain part of the film that was particularly meaningful or stood out to you?
  - c. What was the best part of the film? What was the worst?
  - d. If you were to make a film on the same topic, what would your film look like?
  - e. What do you think the producers of the film hope you will say about it?
  - f. Describe a person you think should not see the film and talk to me about why not? What about a person who should see the film?
  - g. Let's say I had a recording of what was going on in your brain during the movie, what would I hear when I listened to it?
  - h. If the producers had been watching your reaction to the movie, what would they think they had achieved or failed to achieve?
  - i. Tell me about an experience you have with schools that would either help to make one of the points in the movie or help to argue against one of the points in the movie.
  - j. Can you tell me about how you related to another movie about schools? It can be fiction or nonfiction.
2. Describe how the discussion went.
  - a. Why do you think a panel discussion was organized? And would you advise them to do it that way again? Why or why not?
  - b. Describe an ideal panelist.
  - c. Can you describe a certain point one of the panelists made that stood out to you?
  - d. How were you feeling during the panel discussion?
  - e. What would the script of the discussion look like if you had been a main character?
  - f. What was the best part of the discussion? What was the worst?
  - g. Tell me about the last time you were in a discussion about education. I want to hear all about it (then if the example is formal—like in a class, ask about the last time he or she was in an informal or casual conversation about education/schooling/teaching [whatever it is they say the movie is about]).
  - h. What do you think an ideal conversation about schooling looks like?

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