

Pushing Up Against the Limit-Horizon of Educational Change: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Popular Education Reform Texts

Ashlee Anderson, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA

Brittany Aronson, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, USA

Scott Ellison, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa, USA

Sherrie Fairchild-Keyes, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee USA

Abstract

*With this article, we work to identify the limit-horizon of possible ideas, practices, and ways of talking about education reform and schooling via a critical discourse analysis of selected popular political and governmental texts. To do so, we explore the popular discourse of education reform in the United States through our analyses of three very different yet over-lapping social texts: four policy speeches delivered by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in 2009 introducing the Race to the Top (RttT) initiative associated with the National Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009; news media coverage of those speeches and RttT; and, two widely publicized films dealing with the subject of education reform, *Waiting for Superman* & *Won't Back Down*.*

Keywords: *education reform, critical discourse analysis, limit-horizon, Race to the Top, cultural studies*

As long as there has been public education in the U.S., there have been reform movements. In *Tinkering Towards Utopia*, David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995) document the dynamic tensions between the normative purposes of education and the realities of everyday classrooms, as well as the series of reform movements that have emerged over the years in attempts to address those realities. Today, the educational climate is largely informed by neoliberal reform trends that seek to introduce “market forces” into the American education sector with a steady dose of charter schools, standards, and high-stakes assessment. The success of current reformers in pushing through these policies is due in no small part to their success in connecting globalization and economic

competition with educational under-performance (e.g., *A Nation at Risk*) and, subsequently, the introduction of language associated with the achievement gap and equity into political and popular discourses. However, the destructive outcomes of current trends have led to an expanding literature of research that seeks to challenge the quasi-privatization of public schooling (Apple 2012; Ellison 2012; McDonald 2013; Tienken 2013).

With this paper, we seek to contribute to this growing body of literature via a critical discourse analysis of selected popular political and governmental texts. Specifically, we analyze the popular discourse of education reform and its production through the lens of three very different yet over-lapping social texts:

- Four policy speeches delivered by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in 2009 introducing the Race to the Top (hereafter, *RttT*) initiative associated with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009;
- Three Associated Press and one New York Times article covering those speeches and five articles published in national newspapers and news magazines covering *RttT* in the months following the speeches;
- And, two widely publicized films dealing with the subject of education reform: *Waiting for Superman* & *Won't Back Down*

Drawing from the critical theory tradition of the Frankfurt school and the work of Michel Foucault, this research project attempts to unpack these social texts so as to shed light on the ways in which contemporary discursive practices condition our current educational climate and to identify spaces for liberatory intervention and critique. This research, then, seeks to identify the limit-horizon of possible ideas, practices, and ways of talking about education reform and schooling established by the popular discourse of education reform so as to illuminate, what Foucault might term, the “play of power” at work in contemporary educational politics.

An important task for scholars seeking to challenge contemporary trends in education policy is to unlock the transformative potential inherent in the disconnects, contradictions, and contingencies of contemporary discursive and political formations. Critical work should seek to push up against the limits of contemporary educational politics, to “separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think” (Foucault 2007, p. 114). There is transformative potential within contemporary educational discourse and dominant political formations. An important task for researchers, then, is to identify those points of transformative potential, to broaden the limit-horizon of the possible, and to expand the scope of educational change.

We begin with a discussion of our data sources and methodological approach, after which we outline the findings from our analysis of texts, paying particular attention to the ways in which each fleshes out education reform as an interpellating discourse that produces subjects empowered to work within circumscribed social spaces of agency and constraint. We conclude by situating the findings from this analysis within a theoretical framework to inform the project as we move forward.

Data & Methodology

A defining characteristic of cultural studies research is its commitment to exploring the dynamic interplay between discourse and lived experience (Saukko 2003). Cultural studies concerns itself with the production of discourse as systems of representation that become actualized in the lived experiences of individuals positioned within complex socio-political structures. For our purposes, we define discourse as “a cluster [or formation] of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society” (Hall 1997, p. 6). The power of discourse, so to speak, lies in its ability to produce subjectivities that regulate behavior by defining how actors conceptualize, act upon and talk about specific social practices, processes and locations. It, therefore, produces power but not in a reductive sense. Discourse produces subjects empowered with the agency to act upon/within specific social sites, while it also works to establish the limit-horizon of

possible thoughts, actions and ways of talking about those sites. Thus, in the actualization of discourse, there exists spaces for maneuvering, negotiating and challenging the constraints it would enforce. It is the exploration of those spaces, the dynamic spaces between discursive production and lived experience, that is the concern of cultural studies research and that informs the methodological orientation of this research.

The on-going research project detailed in this paper is an analysis of the dynamic interplay between the popular discourse of education reform in the USA and the lived experience of teachers. We begin with a critical discourse analysis of selected political and governmental texts, news media reporting, and popular cultural forms addressing current trends in education policy and reform.¹ Following Cohen (2010), we employed the following grammatical strategies to analyze the political texts:

[S]yntactical strategies that signal the relative importance of the various actors and practices (e.g. indexicalization); lexical strategies that signal contested ideological dimensions of the language (e.g. the repetition of particular words or phrases); stylistic strategies that foreground or background social context (e.g. the use of descriptive words and phrases); and rhetorical strategies employed to ground knowledge claims (e.g. the use of anecdote and statistics). (p. 109)

The data generated by these grammatical strategies were then coded in a thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998) to identify the modes of thought, action and speech (the subjectivities) produced by the discourse of education reform. Questions guiding this initial analysis include: what subject-positions are produced by the popular discourse of education reform and how are they produced? How are they situated in relation to one another? The themes that we developed from this initial analysis were then used to analyze popular cultural forms both as a tool of analysis to further unpack the discourse of education reform and as a means of testing the validity and rigor of those themes.

In order to analyze news media coverage of Duncan's speeches and the *RttT* initiative, we examined two groups of news articles identified using

the LexisNexus research database. The first group of articles were pieces that covered Duncan's four speeches in "real time" (i.e. pieces published immediately after the speeches) and that had national reach. Initially, the goal was to identify articles published by the Associated Press, because AP articles are widely distributed and appear in newspapers (print and web) across the nation often with little to no editing. However, Duncan's June 22 speech to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Conference was not covered by AP, so a New York Times article covering the speech was chosen due to its national reach as a "paper of record." The second group of articles consisted of five longer format pieces covering the Race to the Top initiative as it was being implemented that were published in national newspapers and news magazines between July 2009 and December 2009 (The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, USA Today, and US News and World Report).

To round out the popular discourse of education reform, we selected two films, *Waiting for Superman* (2010) and *Won't Back Down* (2012), based on their wide publicity and national reach. These films have played a prominent role in popular political debates over educational policy. As such, they constitute a discursive formation conditioning the processes of policy development and popular debate over education reform in the U.S. and provide scholars with a powerful heuristic for critically engaging current trends in American education.

The Speeches & News Coverage

In 2009, as part of the campaign for the *RttT* initiative, Arne Duncan travelled the country delivering speeches to promote the educational agenda of the Obama Administration. His first speech, titled "Robust Data Gives Us the Roadmap to Reform" and delivered to the IES Research Conference on June 8, 2009, was largely concerned with the need for expanded data systems to measure and facilitate student success. On June 14, 2009, the Governors Education Symposium heard "Turning Around the Bottom 5 Percent," which strongly promoted federal and state collaboration, as well as the importance of Governor leadership. Following that, Duncan addressed the National Alliance for Public Charter School Conference on June 22, 2009 with "States Will

Lead the Way towards Reform.” In this speech, Duncan expressed support for broadening charter schools around the country. Finally, on July 2, 2009, Duncan concluded his series of policy speeches with “Partners in Reform” addressed to the National Education Association. Here, Duncan described the role of teachers in facilitating the implementation of *RttT*.

Throughout these speeches, Duncan is able to establish a clear Us/Them dichotomy between the policymakers, who represent the “us,” and the teachers, students, school administrators, and parents, who represent the “them.” Examples of this phenomenon include:

- 30 percent of **our** children, **our** students are not finishing high school (“Robust Data Gives Us the Roadmap to Reform”).
- The children in these schools can't wait for incremental reform. **They** need radical change right now—new leadership, new staff, and a whole new educational approach (“States Will Lead the Way towards Reform”).
- **They** [teachers] need to know how well their students are performing. **They** want to know exactly what they need to do to teach and how to teach. It makes their job easier and ultimately much more rewarding. **They** aren't guessing or talking in generalities anymore. **They** feel as if they're starting to crack the code (“Robust Data Gives Us the Roadmap to Reform”).
- **They** [teachers] are tired of being demonized, blamed, and disrespected. **They** want to get on the train (“Partners in Reform”).²

Duncan’s use of *othering* pronouns like “they” and “them” to describe students and teachers distances these populations from the policymakers who are uniquely able to correct their perceived deficiencies (see under-performance section). What is more, Duncan’s continued use of “our” when referring to students and teachers implies ownership in a process that further highlights the overall disempowered position of these stakeholders in larger education discourses. Teachers and students become problems to be solved by policymakers, not active agents capable of transforming schools from the bottom-up. As such, the same stakeholders who experience the concrete realities of public

schooling are the very ones who are denied responsibility for school outcomes, that is, unless those outcomes are negative. Ultimately, Duncan's application of empowering language to policymakers results in the objectification of students and teachers, who become disembodied actors subject to the will of government officials. This sort of student/teacher objectification is manifested in the language of these speeches, as well as in the popular discourse of education reform (news/film).

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the policy speeches and news coverage of those speeches and *RttT: under-performance, we know what's best, collaboration, and the status quo responds*.

Under-performance

Because school performance is currently measured by test scores, achievement gaps, graduation/dropout rates and preparedness for college and/or careers, an underperforming school will demonstrate chronically poor test scores (particularly among students of color and/or poverty), high dropout rates, and unpreparedness for college and/or career. These sorts of negative labels feature prominently in the speeches and are manifested almost exclusively by the students and teachers who populate underperforming schools. Categories that were collapsed into this theme include: 1) *under-performance*, wherein Duncan explicitly details areas of concern, i.e. dropout rates, international competition, career readiness, etc.; and 2) *high quality/standards*, wherein Duncan highlights the need for high quality teachers and leaders, as well as high (common) standards for students, and so assumes that the current quality/standards are low.³

The language Duncan employs is instructive. He is able to capitalize off of negative terms like “chronically low-achieving,” “second-rate,” and “third-rate” in order to win support for the *RttT* initiative. Because schools are “failing,” policy intervention is required. In so doing, he sets up a clear power differential where policymakers, not students and teachers, enjoy the primary responsibility for school success. In fact, although Duncan repeatedly declines to issue specific blame for under-performance, his language consistently empowers students, teachers,

and schools with subject positions only when negative actions are being described. As such, students and teachers are positioned as “problems,” whose solution is for policymakers to “think very differently” about schooling, primarily through the expansion of data systems, the implementation of common, rigorous standards, the closure of failing schools, and the introduction of more effective teacher and principal training and evaluation. Whether or not this solution will be able to correct the perceived problem of under-performance remains to be seen. Ultimately, that is not really the goal of this strategy; rather, Duncan seems more intent on establishing a crisis-like state so as to win approval for his reforms.

In the news coverage of Duncan's speeches and *RttT*, under-performance is largely assumed. The issues of low academic achievement and achievement gaps are taken at face value and form the backdrop for the larger narratives constructed in each piece. The arc of these narratives entails the movement of knowledgeable policymakers and reformers working to change the system and the response of those who are the objects of reform.

We Know What's Best

Once the problem of under-performance has been established, Duncan is able to solicit support for the *RttT* initiative by contending that policymakers have the know-how, courage, and/or leadership required to make the changes necessary for school improvement. This theme, then, indicates those examples where policymakers assume a sort of expert position regarding what is best not only for students, parents and communities, but also for classroom teachers, who are removed of any sort of agency. Categories that were collapsed into this theme include: 1) *we know what works*, wherein Duncan describes why policymakers are uniquely qualified to solve the “problem” of educational under-performance (“proven strategies,” experience, know-how, etc.); 2) *we know how to “fix” the “problem,”* a subcategory that includes language related to common standards and expanded data systems; 3) *we have the money*, wherein Duncan discusses the unique fiscal opportunity available; and 4) *we have what it takes*, which describes congratulatory language where the character traits necessary for educational

improvement (courage, leadership, service, hard work, etc.) are described as being possessed by policymakers.

These rhetorical strategies would suggest that policymakers, because of the many “examples of success” available to them, know what to do to correct the “problem” of educational under-performance: institute common standards and expand current data systems to measure progress (“Robust Data Gives Us the Roadmap to Reform”). However, the practical effect of this sort of language is the establishment of a clear power differential that is dominated by policymakers who, alone, are uniquely capable of improving schools and the objectified actors who populate them. They have the money. They have the will. Now, they just need other stakeholders to have the courage to “do the right thing.”

Likewise, news coverage of Duncan's speeches and the *RttT* initiative situate the Obama Administration and Arne Duncan in an authoritative position of having the know-how, courage, and/or leadership required to make the changes necessary for school improvement. This positioning establishes a clear power relation between the federal government, on the one hand, and the states and teachers who are the objects of federal reform, on the other. For example, the Obama Administration “challenges,” “pushes,” “warns,” “strong-arms,” “persuades,” “incentivizes,” “requires,” and “brings along” state leaders and teachers who are positioned as obstacles to be overcome. In this Us/Them dichotomy, state leaders and teachers are situated in the position of responding to federal initiatives without the agency of being drivers of educational change. Categories that were collapsed into this theme include: 1) *authority*, wherein the Obama Administration and Arne Duncan are situated in a privileged position of knowing the correct path for education reform efforts and possessing the political and moral authority to push states and teachers to take that path; and 2) *judgment*, a sub-category that empowers the Obama Administration and Arne Duncan to exercise their authority in passing judgment on state policies and teacher effectiveness.

The significance of the rhetorical strategy associated with this theme is that it works to foreground the actions and initiatives of the Obama

Administration while backgrounding the role of states and teachers. The Obama Administration is presented as being champions of reform strategies that will spur innovation, close achievement gaps and (ultimately) lift struggling student populations out of poverty. States and teachers are presented in these articles as being objects of federal reform; objects that are to be pushed into compliance with the will of an Obama Administration that is presented as a proactive subject possessing both agency and expertise. It is important to note that the objects of federal reforms constructed in these articles are far from being inert. The dynamic is one of action and reaction.

Collaboration

Throughout the speeches, Arne Duncan embraces the notion of collaboration and cooperation between stakeholders as a means to produce improved educational outcomes. Duncan suggests that, if we all work together, we will be able to “fix” the “problem” of student under-performance. This commonsensical conception of collaboration and “working together,” however, also functions to establish a clear Us/Them binary where the “us” falsely appears to include all stakeholders. Duncan, here, assumes that we all have the same shared values and that we all seek the same outcomes. This dichotomy also asserts that if we do not all agree, we will “compromise our future” and, thus, have a “moral obligation” and an urgency to collectively join forces. Overall, Duncan suggests that if we do not do this, “you” (those on the other side of the Us/Them spectrum) do not care about “our” children or “our” future. Categories that were collapsed into this theme include: 1) *cooperation*, wherein Duncan suggests that buying into the *RttT* initiative will guarantee a solution to under-performance⁴; 2) *doing the right thing*, a subcategory that includes language related to shared values and a call to action (“it’s the right thing for kids,” “the president called on us to . . .,” “think differently,” etc.); 3) *moral obligation*, which suggests that if we do not all work together we may “compromise our future” (it is “our” responsibility; “America’s children need your help”); and lastly 4) *urgency*, which implies that if we do not act quickly, we will inevitably lose the race.

These examples illustrate the ways in which Duncan uses seductive language to villainize those who are not “on board the train.” What is

more, Duncan is able to “distract” his audience members through a rhetorical strategy that capitalizes off of language associated with the common good (defined, of course, in terms of elite conceptions of what the common good really looks like). We see this through his references to the urgent nature of the matter and the opportunity “we” have to mend the problem, as if it is a privilege.⁵ Furthermore, slogans such as “doing the right thing,” and “compromise our future” serve as euphemisms to assert control over reform efforts initiated from the top-down.⁶

Ultimately, although Duncan directly states that cooperation is the key to school reform, he himself does little to cooperate with the actors directly involved in the schooling process. “They” is still used to describe objectified teachers who are “hungering for data” or pathologized students who are “begging to be challenged.” In actuality, Duncan looks to fulfill his own vision of school turn-around, where teachers function as the good civil servants, and students produce desired outcomes: test scores.

Interestingly, news coverage of the speeches and *RttT* does not emphasize this call to collaborate. Instead, the news articles construct narratives of conflict in which a reactive status quo responds to the work of federal policymakers and reformers. With the following section, we elaborate on this theme, particularly as it is manifested in the news coverage of the speeches.

The Status Quo Responds

In opposition to the Obama Administration, the articles covering Duncan's speeches and *RttT* situate state leaders and teachers in a reactive position of, in the case of states, being weighed down by outdated laws standing in the way of innovative reform and obediently responding to the will of the Obama Administration. In the case of teachers, they are positioned as standing in the way of reform efforts for their own selfish reasons, a stance that positions them as being in opposition to educational innovation and the closing of achievement gaps. While state leaders and teachers are positioned somewhat differently, the commonality linking the two is that they are both positioned as being barriers to be overcome and are positioned in a

reactive position in which they possess neither agency nor expertise in addressing educational failure. Newsweek's Jonathan Alter (2010) best summarizes the tone of these articles in describing these forces of the status quo as being "The Blob": "the collection of bureaucracies, school boards, and teachers' unions committed to protecting the failed status quo" (para. 3).

This theme is marked by language that backgrounds state leaders and teachers who "worry," "oppose," "respond," "push back," "acknowledge concerns," "resist," and "sign on." Categories that were collapsed into this theme include: 1) *States respond*, in which state leaders are eager to ensure compliance with federal demands. Two sub-categories are relevant here: *falling into line*, in which the articles point toward state leadership pursuing legislation to become compliant with federal demands and often "trumpeting their success" in being able to do so, and *we're already in compliance*, in which states "push back" only to challenge their ineligibility for the funds. 2) *Teachers respond*, wherein teachers are positioned as being in opposition to federal demands without possessing alternative ideas of their own. Two sub-categories are relevant here: *opposition and resistance*, where teachers are positioned as rejecting federal initiatives deemed threatening to their interests, and *worry and skepticism*, in which teachers are said to "worry" about the direction of federal initiatives but are "withholding judgment."

The ultimate outcome of these rhetorical strategies is the creation of a stark dichotomy of agency and reaction. At the same time that the Obama Administration and Arne Duncan are positioned as being proactive agents possessing both the will and expertise to introduce bold new ideas into the American education system, state leaders and teachers are positioned, although in different ways, as being reactive, bounded agents who can either fall in line with the will of the Obama Administration or simply oppose and resist. More importantly, the linkage of federal initiatives with over-coming achievement gaps positions the Obama Administration as being the champion of justice, while, conversely, opposition and resistance to these initiatives positions teachers as its enemies.

Going to the Movies

Two recent films, *Waiting for Superman* (2010) and *Won't Back Down* (2012)⁷ reflect similar messages to those found in Duncan's speeches and their associated news coverage. *Waiting for Superman* is a documentary that details the perceived inadequacies of public schooling, largely through discussions of teacher quality (or lack thereof), unions that protect bad teachers, and the redemptive qualities of charter schools. *Won't Back Down* is a fictional representation of the collective stories of the children and families documented in *Waiting for Superman*. Jamie Fitzpatrick (played by Maggie Gyllenhaal), a parent dissatisfied with the failing school to which she must send her daughter, joins forces with Nona Alberts (played by Viola Davis) to take over the chronically "failing" Adams Elementary. In the end, parents and community members triumph over school and union leaders when they are approved to reopen Adams as a charter school. Overall, these films round out the popular discourse of education reform in which teachers and unions are villainized as obstacles to the systemic improvement of public education, and charter schools are championed as holding the answers for which we are so desperately looking.

Under-performance

Under-performance is the most visible of the four themes manifested in the films. *Waiting for Superman* presents both statistics and personal accounts that detail the ways in which public schools are inadequate. The language of failure is paramount. For example, underperforming schools are consistently labeled with terms like "failing," "dropout factories," and "academic sinkholes." Ultimately, the film positions teachers and the unions who protect them as the primary source of blame. Images of tenured teachers who are more interested in a paycheck than student learning are particularly powerful. When coupled with the personal accounts of several young children whose futures are dependent on schools that are currently "failing," under-performance becomes a moral imperative, the solution for which gets framed as better teachers and more charter schools.

Won't Back Down includes similar imagery. Adams Elementary, the school where Jamie Fitzpatrick is forced to enroll her daughter due to

financial constraints, acts as a virtual prison predictor that determines “what kids are going to drop out so they know how many prison cells to build.” Not only does the school suffer from chronic failure due to its low test scores and academic unpreparedness, its teachers are either unable or unwilling to address these concerns. Typically, teachers assume one of three roles: *the indifferent/self-interested/unrepentant*, *the broken*, or *the torn*. *The indifferent/self-interested/unrepentant* refers to teachers who are only drawing a paycheck. For example, the opening scene shows an Adams teacher who, instead of teaching her class of despondent-looking children, spends her time behind a desk, texting and shopping online. *The broken* refers to teachers who have lost sight of why they entered the field. Nona Alberts, the hollow and uninspired teacher who regains her zest for teaching in the pursuit of charter status for Adams, is a good example of this role. Those teachers who are caught between their own self-interests or belief in labor protections and the systemic failure in which they are trapped assume the role of what we term *the torn*. For example, Michael Perry, the Teach for America (TFA) music teacher and love interest of Jamie Fitzpatrick, struggles with Jamie and Nona’s efforts to reopen Adams as a charter. He chose to teach at a challenging school like Adams and is not convinced that union busting is the solution. Ultimately, the film develops crude binaries that are set in opposition to one another. The basic structure of the story is a battle between *the broken* and *the indifferent/self-interested/unrepentant* that is only mildly troubled by the introduction of *the torn*, which represent an ideological middle ground of common sense and considered skepticism. The arc of the story follows *the broken* as they face up to their own sense of alienation, reconnect with their passion and become agents of change against a system made up of *indifferent/self-interested/unrepentant* who place their own interests first and are, therefore, barriers to change.

Overall, these depictions position teachers as either the source of public schooling’s problems or victims of it. In both cases, the overall message is clear: public education is broken, and we have a responsibility to “fix” it, a sentiment that is highly reminiscent of the kinds of underperforming schools and teachers documented in *Waiting for Superman* as well. The ultimate outcome is the establishment of a crisis-like state that requires

policy intervention.

We Know What's Best

Throughout the films, the theme of *we know what's best* plays out as the solution to the under-performance that is seriously limiting the opportunities of America's schoolchildren. For example, *Waiting for Superman* suggests that "it should be simple," (teachers input knowledge) but "we've made it complicated" (tenure and bureaucracy). As a result, we need to get rid of the bad teachers who are either unable or unwilling to deliver knowledge (as assessed through student test scores) and expand access to charter schools, which have fewer restrictions and protections for teachers than do public schools. Geoffrey Canada, a leading charter founder who features prominently in *Waiting for Superman*, echoes this position:

We have now data from the first 1,000 kids who have gone through four years of KIPP. Those kids have gone from the 32nd to the 60th percentile in reading and from the 40th to the 82nd percentile in math. We have never had those kinds of gains for low-income kids. Twenty-five years ago there was no proof that something else worked. Well, now we know what works. We know that it's just a lie that disadvantaged kids can't learn. We know that if you apply the right accountability and standards you can get fabulous results. So why would we do something else? (*Waiting for Superman*)

This sentiment positions charter schools as a sort of commonsense solution to educational under-performance. However, it fails to point out that charter schools are able to shape their student population through attrition, discipline, and expulsion (Finch, Lapsley & Baker-Boudissa 2009; Miron, Urschel & Saxton 2011; Ni 2012; Vasquez Heilig, Williams, McSpadden, McNeil & Lee 2011). In many ways, then, the solution as it is depicted in this film is incomplete at best.

In the case of *Won't Back Down*, the push for charters as the primary solution to educational under-performance is amplified. The film in its entirety traces the evolution of Adams Elementary from its beginnings as a desolate institution where a corrupt administration and uncaring

teachers who are protected by unions doom students to failure. Once Fitzpatrick and Alberts are able to overcome *the indifferent/self-interested/unrepentant* who animate a broken system, Adams transforms into a joyful, literally brighter charter where students celebrate in their learning. Charter schools, then, become a sort of savior of public education, and unions represent its demise.

Collaboration

Waiting for Superman's call to "join the movement" reflects an effort to bring people together to achieve the goal of turning around schools deemed underperforming. The push for collaboration is most evident in the documentary's closing remarks:

Great schools come from great people in every city, town. People are doing it every day, people like you. There are steps you can take to create great schools, your school, any school, and every school. *We know what works*: quality teachers, more classroom time, world-class standards, high expectations, real accountability. The problem is complex, but the steps are simple. It starts with teachers becoming the very best, leaders removing the barriers to change, neighbors committed to their school, you willing to act, go to waitingforsuperman.com. Share this film. Tell everyone you know to pledge. (*Waiting for Superman*)

The film suggests that, by working together to support charter schools and to increase accountability, we can solve the problem of under-performance. It also positions those who might not support this method of reform as barriers to change.

Collaborative efforts are also evident in *Won't Back Down's* characters Jamie Fitzpatrick and Nona Alberts as they work together to take over Adams Elementary by taking advantage of the "Fail Safe Law" (Parent Trigger Law). Fitzpatrick approaches Alberts with her desire to "turn a school around," because she is, "so tired of being shafted." She states, "you've got need, you don't want to be left behind, and neither do I." With this scene, the filmmakers suggest that not only do we have an

obligation to prevent others from “being shafted,” but we need the collective forces of parents, teachers, and community members to do so. Just as Duncan calls on the public to “join the movement,” the filmmakers have used these real and fictional anecdotes to argue that the public has a moral and ethical responsibility to get involved. The messages are consistent: public schools are failing; we know the best way to improve these schools; we must work together to turn these schools around.

The Status Quo Responds

The ways in which teachers and unions are represented in these films, in large part, mirror the positioning identified in the policy speeches and media coverage of *RttT*. Teachers and their unions are positioned as a force of opposition and resistance to policies that threaten their own self interests, a positioning that (at best) ignores the interests of students. In *Waiting for Superman*, we see images of tenured teachers reading newspapers with little regard for their students’ learning, administrators and superintendents who are forced to shuffle poor teachers around (via the “dance of the lemons,” 43:25) instead of firing them, and powerful pushback from unions who are positioned as mere protectors of a dysfunctional status quo. Michelle Rhee, former chancellor of D.C. public schools and TFA alum, figures prominently here. Rhee became a controversial figure in the education sector, largely as a result of her move to close schools, terminate principals, and eliminate office jobs, in addition to her efforts to implement a two-tiered system of compensation wherein teachers would be offered the choice of merit-based pay with no rights of tenure or much smaller salary raises with tenure rights retained. In the film, Rhee is positioned as a sort of champion for students who becomes the victim of a failed bureaucracy and union thugs who aim to keep bad teachers in the classroom. In this way, teachers, and especially the unions who protect them, are depicted as self-interested protectors of the status quo, and so become barriers to positive educational change.

In *Won't Back Down*, it is the conflict between the protagonists, Jamie and Nona, and the entrenched interests of teachers and union leaders that form the backbone of the film's narrative structure. Each success

achieved by the protagonists is met with resistance of varying degrees. As the narrative unfolds, Jamie and Nona each face push back from teachers and union leaders that ranges from the petty to the borderline criminal. When Nona's colleagues learn of her activism to convert Adams into a charter school, she is confronted and questioned in the teachers' lounge with one teacher saying angrily: "You're messing with our jobs" (47:28). Nona's deteriorating relationship with her colleagues culminates with her delivery of an impassioned and rousing plea to seize the "chance to be the teacher we always wanted to be," a plea that is met with the anticlimactic response of "Who says we're not?" (60:31).

The response that Jamie faces comes from a union leader who, over the course of the film, becomes increasingly worried about Jamie's success in building support for Adams' conversion into a charter school. After winning a key victory, the union leader, Evelyn Riske (Holly Hunter), invites Jamie to visit a private school that features the latest in technology and that provides the kind of special services that Jamie's daughter needs but isn't receiving at Adams (70:14). The scene reaches its climax when Evelyn makes the unsolicited offer to "put in a good word" for Jamie's daughter to receive a scholarship to the private school, a proposal to which Jamie responds: "Are you buying me off?" (71:42-74:10). The obvious implication of the scene is that the union leadership is prepared to offer a bribe in order to protect what it perceives as being in its own best interests.

The ultimate outcome of these representations is the positioning of teachers and unions as self-interested forces of resistance, whose own needs become more important than those of students. It is Alter's 'Blob' that is constructed in these films. We see the monolithic force of a failed status quo that is openly hostile to those who seek to reform schools and, therefore, to the needs of the students and communities they serve.

Analysis

Education reform today is a global project driven by a complex network of policy actors ranging from elected officials and an ever-expanding array of think tanks and policy institutes to a new breed of entrepreneurial philanthropy (Ball 2012). These actors construct policy

regimes, carry out research functions, fund reform initiatives, and (importantly) work to brand and market education reform policies. These new policy actors are not simply technocrats or philanthropists working to achieve public goals but are, instead, members of media-savvy institutions well versed in political marketing who are working to construct ideological and cultural articulations that serve specific political goals. It is this perspective that informed the selection of texts analyzed in this study.

News media coverage of education issues exerts a great deal of influence over policy. Duncan's speeches introducing *RttT* were designed to generate favorable news coverage that frames the initiatives associated with *RttT* positively and resistance to them negatively. The findings of these analyses largely mirror those of similar studies of news media representations of teachers in the context of education reform (Cohen 2012; Shine & O'Donoghue 2013) and suggest that Duncan was successful in accomplishing his appointed task. Additionally, the two films analyzed in this study were both produced by Walden Media which is owned by well known conservative activist and supporter of education reform Philip Anschutz. Both films construct narratives that serve Anschutz's political interests and, in the case of *Waiting for Superman*, feature other prominent policy actors in American education, including Bill Gates and Michele Rhee.

The ways in which the texts analyzed in this study empower policymakers at the same time as they objectify students and teachers through their lexical, stylistic, and rhetorical choices present a strict Us/Them dichotomy where we (federal policymakers) are the solution to them (under-performing students and teachers). According to Brantlinger (2009), "In creating imaginary, symbolic distinctions that reify difference, powerful insiders project onto outsiders what they disdain. If the central group considers itself normal and able, 'Others' become abnormal and disabled" (p. 402). Ultimately, the stakeholders responsible for daily classroom realities become pathologized for failing to achieve according to standards and consequential accountability systems, about which they are typically not consulted yet to which they are ultimately liable.

This sort of top-down reform effort is certainly not new. In his recent book aimed at deconstructing the “bad teacher” myth, Kumashiro (2012) details the ways in which larger reform efforts that scapegoat teachers for the perceived inadequacies of public education ultimately obscure the systemic realities that structure schooling practice. This process functions to let the system off the hook and legitimate the same deficits that inform it. Despite the fact that students and teachers populate our schools, these texts rarely give credit where credit is due.⁸ Instead, policymakers alone become the real change agents.

The sorts of solutions offered up by Duncan present a significant practical concern in addition to the devastating outcomes of student/teacher disempowerment. For Duncan, the implementation of common standards and expanded data systems, both of which are designed to assess teacher quality and facilitate the introduction of merit-based pay, the hallmark mandate of *RttT*, are seen as commonsense. However, Duncan himself has no real evidence that these solutions would produce desirable outcomes. He says:

It's too early to see real results about pay-for-performance initiatives. There aren't a lot of studies showing it boosts student achievement, but there is plenty of evidence that it boosts worker productivity in other industries, so why shouldn't we try it? Over time, you collectively will tell us whether it's working. (“Robust Data Gives Us the Roadmap to Reform”)

In fact, recent studies designed to assess the efficacy of merit-based pay initiatives have found just the opposite:

A recent large-scale study of performance-based pay for public school teachers, conducted by the National Center on Performance Initiatives at Vanderbilt University, found what others have found before: “Merit pay” doesn't work (Springer et al., 2010). A recent *Education Week* review of private sector experience with pay-for performance concludes that it “nourishes short-term performance, annihilates long-term planning, builds fear,

demolishes teamwork, nourishes rivalry and politics" (Gabor, 2010, p. 28). (Gerson 2012, p. 105)⁹

It would seem that the normative claims manifested in these speeches are not entirely flush with reality, nor are they able to create the systemic changes necessary to transform public education. How can we improve our schools if we consistently villainize and disempower the very individuals who ultimately act as arbiters of success? More teacher-bashing is certainly not the answer.

In addition, the reference to a shared set of values ignores critiques that the kind of rigidity called for by high-stakes accountability systems further exacerbates achievement gaps. The language masks realities and romanticizes histories that never existed. We have never had a shared set of values; in fact, we have always been a nation founded on differences (Smith-Rosenberg 2010). What's more, regarding the ways in which achievement gaps are measured, it is important to think about the origins of these rules (Kumashiro 2012). According to Kumashiro (2012), "inequity and power differences can result not simply from one group overpowering another in a competition, but also from one group defining or in other ways indirectly manipulating the very rules of that competition in ways that advantage them" (p. 4). Until we deal with the actual problem of social inequality and change the way that we evaluate and measure students,¹⁰ we will not eliminate achievement gaps. On this point we agree with Kumashiro (2012), it is not the schools or children themselves who are failing, it is the structure of school reform that is failing.

Discussion & Conclusion

With this analysis, we have tried to take seriously Michael Apple's call to think like heretics, to see where we, as critics working in academic spaces, can become a positive force in challenging what we see as a destructive trend in education policy. And, we think that Foucault's conceptualization of criticism as "analyzing and reflecting on limits" offers us a productive way to move forward.

As an interpellating discourse, education reform works to establish the limit-horizon of possible educational change. To put it another way, the discourse of education reform produces subjects that are empowered to work within circumscribed spaces, and it is within those conflicted spaces that we can find our bearings. This analysis has attempted to flesh out the limit-horizon of possible ideas, actions and ways of talking about education that is produced by this discursive practice, not simply to establish the necessary limitations it imposes, but to transform the question of limits into a question of possibilities, “to transform the critique conducted in the form of a necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression” (Foucault 2007, p. 113).

Throughout the speeches and their associated news coverage, as well as in the popular films, teachers are positioned as powerless agents subject to the will of policymakers. In fact, teachers are typically only empowered when negative outcomes are being referenced. The rhetorical techniques consistently embraced successfully distance the policymakers who solve problems from the students/teachers who create them. In this way, policymakers alone assume the responsibility for school improvement, and the students and teachers who populate schools become objectified, despite the fact that these actors experience the concrete realities of the classroom. The practical effect of this discursive formation, then, is the dehumanization of teachers. They are removed from policy debates, and so become disempowered and disembodied. Ultimately, we see this human deficit in education research as an alarming trend. In order to push up against the limit-horizon of educational change, we need to work hard to rehumanize teachers and students, at least in part by introducing them into the policy conversation.

Moving forward, the research project detailed in this paper is currently conducting focus group interviews with experienced, practicing teachers in order to: 1) understand how they perceive and make sense of current trends in the popular discourse of education reform, and (more importantly) 2) seek out their perspective on the issues and problems they face in their professional practices and to solicit ideas for how to resolve them. We hope to re-humanize and foreground the perspective

of teachers as a means of building policy proposals from “the ground up.” It is a sad commentary on the American political system that in a period of sweeping education reform and public debate over public schooling those who have the most intimate knowledge of the issues facing our schools are not simply excluded from the national conversation but are actively marginalized. It is here that we have found a point of possible transgression, and so it is to this task we now turn.

References

- Alter, J 2010, ‘Obama's Class Project’, *Newsweek*, 20 September, p. 58. Available from LexisNexus Academic database.
- Apple, MW 2012, ‘Forward’ in *The assault on public education*, ed. WH Watkins, Teachers College Press, New York, pp. ix-xiv.
- Ball, S 2012, *Global Education Inc.: New Policy Networks and the Neo-liberal Imaginary*, Routledge, New York.
- Boyatzis, RE 1998, *Transforming Qualitative Information*, Sage Publications, London.
- Brantlinger, E 2009, ‘Impediments to social justice: hierarchy, science, faith, and imposed identity (disability classification)’ in *Handbook of social justice in education*, eds. W Ayers, T Quinn & D Stovall, Routledge, New York, pp. 400-16.
- Cohen, JL 2010, ‘Teachers in the news: a critical analysis of one US newspaper's discourse on education, 2006-2007’, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 105-119.
- Dillon, S 2009, ‘Education chief to warn advocates that inferior charter schools harm the effort’, *The New York Times*, 22 June, p. 10A. Available from LexisNexus Academic database.
- Dillon, S 2009, ‘\$4.3 Billion, Obama pushes states to shift on education’, *The New York Times*, 17 August, p. 01A. Available from LexisNexus Academic database.
- Ellison, S 2012, ‘From within the belly of the beast: rethinking the concept of the ‘educational marketplace’ in the popular discourse of education reform’, *Educational Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 119-136.
- Finch, H, Lapsley, DK & Baker-Boudissa, M 2009, ‘A survival analysis of student mobility and retention in Indiana charter schools’, *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, vol. 17, no. 18, Available from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v17n18/>.
- Foucault, M 2007, ‘What is Enlightenment?’ in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. S Lotringer, Semiotext(e), Cambridge, pp. 97-120.

- Gabor, A 2010, 'Why pay incentives are destined to fail', *Education Week*, 22 September, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 24, 28.
- Gerson, J 2012, 'The neoliberal agenda and the response of teachers unions' in *The assault on public education*, ed. WH Watkins, Teachers College Press New York, pp. 97-124.
- Hall, S 1997, 'Introduction', in *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*, ed. S Hall, Sage Publications, London, pp. 1-11.
- Kumashiro, KK 2008, *The seduction of common sense: how the right has framed the debate on America's schools*. Teachers College Press, New York.
- Kumashiro, KK 2012, *Bad teacher: how blaming teachers distorts the bigger picture*, Teachers College Press, New York
- McDonald, L 2013, 'Think tanks and the media: how the conservative movement gained entry into the education policy arena', *Educational Policy*, XX(X).
- Miners, Z 2009, 'The race is on for school reform', *US News & World Report*, 30 July, Available from LexisNexus Academic database.
- Miron, G, Urschel, JL. & Saxton, N 2011, 'What makes KIPP work? A study of student characteristics, attrition, and school finance', National Center for the Study of Privatisation in Education, Teachers College, New York
- Ni, Y 2012, 'The sorting effect of Charter Schools on student composition in traditional public schools', *Educational Policy* vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 215–242.
- Pope, J & Quaid, L 2009, 'Education chief hopes stimulus will push standards', *Associated Press*, 14 June, Available from LexisNexus Academic database.
- Quaid, L 2009, 'Ed secretary: judge teachers on how students do', *Associated Press*, 8 June, Available from LexisNexus Academic database
- Quaid, L 2009, 'Education secretary challenges NEA on teacher pay', *Associated Press*, 2 July, Available from LexisNexus Academic database.
- Saukko, P 2003, *Doing research in cultural studies: an introduction to classical and new methodological approaches*, Sage Publications, London.
- Shear, MD & Anderson, N 2009, '\$4 billion push for better schools: Obama hopes funding will be powerful incentive in 'Race to the Top'', *Washington Post*, 24, p. 01A. Available from LexisNexus Academic database.
- Shine, K & O'Donoghue, T 2013, 'Teacher representation in news reporting on standardised testing: a case study from Western

- Australia', *Educational Studies*, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 385-398.
- Song, J & Felch, J 2009, 'Obama announces \$4.35-billion school-funding competition', *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July, Available from LexisNexus Academic database.
- Springer, M, Ballou, D, Hamilton, L, Le, V, Lockwood, J, McCaffrey, D, Pepper, M & Stecher, B 2010, *Teacher pay for performance: experimental evidence from the project on Incentives in Teaching*, National Center on Performance Initiatives at Vanderbilt University, Nashville.
- Tienken, CH 2013, 'Neoliberalism, social darwinism, and consumerism masquerading as school reform. *Interchange*, vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 295-316.
- Toppo, G 2009, 'Ready, set, race for education money: states rush to make changes to get part of stimulus grant', *USA Today*, 4 November, p. 07D. Available from LexisNexus Academic database.
- Tyack, D & Cuban, L 1995, *Tinkering towards utopia: a century of public school reform*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge
- Vasquez Heilig, J, Williams, A, McNeil, L & Lee, C 2011, 'Is choice a panacea? An analysis of black secondary student attrition from KIPP, other private charters and urban districts', *Berkeley Review of Education*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 153-178.

Appendix A Representative Sample of Data

Theme One: Underperformance

- So what is the data telling us? It tells us that something like 30 percent of our children, our students are not finishing high school. It tells us that many adults who do graduate go on to college but need remedial education. They're receiving high school diplomas but they're not ready for college (Robust Data Gives Us the Roadmap to Reform).
- These schools have failed to make adequate yearly progress for at least five years in a row (States Will Lead the Way towards Reform).
- With 30 percent of our kids dropping out of high school and millions of those in college struggling to achieve, we are falling dangerously behind other countries (States Will Lead the Way towards Reform).
- Today, I want to focus on the challenge of turning around our chronically low-achieving schools. These schools have failed to make progress year after year (Turning Around the Bottom 5 Percent)
- Two thousand high schools produce half of the dropouts in the country. Their kids are years behind grade. They are perpetuating poverty and social failure. When it comes to these schools, we need to think differently. We need the courage to change (Partners in Reform).

Theme Two: We Know What's Best

- We have proven strategies for success in schools all across America (Partners In Reform).
- We know what success looks like. I see it the moment I enter a school. It's clean, orderly, the staff is positive and welcoming, and the kids and the classroom are the focus. I see award-winning school work on the walls. I see discipline and enthusiasm in the children. I see parents engaged and teachers collaborating on instruction (Turning Around the Bottom 5 Percent).

- We need standards that will get them ready for the day after they graduate (States Will Lead the Way towards Reform).
- We have the money and we have the technology. The biggest barrier, the only remaining barrier in my mind is whether we have the courage. It takes courage to expose our weaknesses with a truly transparent data system. It takes courage to admit our flaws and take steps to address them (Robust Data Gives Us the Roadmap to Reform).
- We have a lot of work left to do, particularly in raising the achievement of our students at the secondary school level, whose test scores have barely moved over the past three decades (Robust Data Gives Us the Roadmap to Reform).
- The children in these schools can't wait for incremental reform. They need radical change right now—new leadership, new staff, and a whole new educational approach (States Will Lead the Way towards Reform).
- 30 percent of our children, our students are not finishing high school (Robust Data Gives Us the Roadmap to Reform).
- They [teachers] are tired of being demonized, blamed, and disrespected. They want to get on the train (Partners in Reform).
- America's teachers are yearning to be partners in reform and change. They want teaching to be a respected profession that has high standards for performance, rewards excellence, provides opportunities for advancement, and promotes real collaboration (Partners in Reform).
- They [teachers] need to know how well their students are performing. They want to know exactly what they need to do to teach and how to teach. It makes their job easier and ultimately much more rewarding. They aren't guessing or talking in generalities anymore. They feel as if they're starting to crack the code (Robust Data Gives Us the Roadmap to Reform).
- Duncan travels the country delivering a blunt message to state officials who have resisted change for decades: Embrace reform or risk being shut out (Shear & Anderson, 2009).
- Holding out billions of dollars as a potential windfall, the Obama administration is persuading state after state to rewrite education

laws to open the door to more charter schools and expand the use of student test scores for judging teachers (Dillon, 2009, August 17)

- Tucked into the 110 billion federal stimulus slated for education, a comparatively tiny grant known as the Race to the Top requires that states that want the money must commit to closing historic achievement gaps and getting more students into college -- but they also must show that they're attending to a few nitty-gritty details that President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan believe are important, including tying teacher pay to student test scores and loosening legal caps on the number of charter schools that states allow (Toppo, 2009).
- Duncan will also consider whether states are encouraging charter schools... He wants charter schools to play a role in his effort to convince thousands of communities to close low-performing schools and reopen them with new principals and teachers (Quaid, 2009, June 8).
- U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan is offering federal cash incentives to achieve one of his priorities: developing national standards for reading and math to replace a current hodgepodge of benchmarks in the states (Pope & Quaid, 2009).
- In an interview, Duncan said he would use the address to praise innovations made by high-quality charter schools, urge charter leaders to become more active in weeding out bad apples in their movement and invite the leaders to help out in the administration's broad effort to remake several thousand of the nation's worst public schools (Dillon, 2009).
- Education Secretary Arne Duncan challenged members of the National Education Association Thursday to stop resisting the idea of linking teacher pay to student performance (Quaid, 2009, July 2).
- President Obama singled out California on Friday for failing to use education data to distinguish poor teachers from good ones, a situation that his administration said must change for the state to receive competitive federal school dollars (Song & Felch, 2009).
- [Duncan] is urging states to use the grant funds to ease limits on charter schools and warning that those who don't will put

themselves at a competitive disadvantage (Miners 2009).

Theme Three: Cooperation

- You must become full partners and leaders in education reform. You and I must be willing to change (Partners In Reform).
- Our challenge is to make sure every child in America is learning from an effective teacher—no matter what it takes. So today, I ask you to join President Obama and me in a new commitment to results that recognizes and rewards success in the classroom and is rooted in our common obligation to children (Partners In Reform).
- With your help and your thoughtful work, we can overcome the legitimate concerns of teachers that they are being judged merely on test scores (Robust Data Gives Us the Roadmap to Reform).
- So while this effort is being led at the state level, as it should be, it is absolutely a national challenge, which we must meet together or we will compromise our future (States Will Lead the Way towards Reform).
- There is no shortage of courage in this room. You wouldn't be here if you weren't risk-takers. So I'm asking you once again to put your reputations on the line and take on this challenge. I'm asking for your help because I believe in you. I'm asking because I am hopeful. I'm asking, above all, because our children need you and America needs you (Turning Around the Bottom 5 Percent).

Theme Four: The Status Quo Responds

- Seven states have lifted restrictions on public charter schools to better compete for the funds, the Associated Press reported Friday. Other states, such as Colorado and Massachusetts, are trumpeting their recent progress on issues like merit pay and higher educational standards, which they believe will give them an inside track to secure the federal dollars (Song & Feltch, 2009).
- [Teachers' Unions] have opposed using test scores in evaluations, saying misuse of ambiguous data could lead to unfair dismissals (Dillon, 2009, August 17).
- Such sentiments worry Weingarten [AFT President]. She thinks that some states are moving too fast and that the availability of

new federal grants is pushing people to say and do things simply because everybody is desperate for resources (Miners, 2009).

- As a result, [charter schools] are hotly opposed by teachers and other critics who say they drain money and talent from other public schools (Quaid, 2009, June 8).
- Every state except Alaska, South Carolina, Missouri and Texas has signed on to an effort to develop standards by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers (Pope & Quaid, 2009).
- California officials are pushing back against suggestions that a state law on teacher evaluations could disqualify them from receiving funds (Shear & Anderson, 2009).
- The first money doesn't go out until January, but state legislatures over the past few months have been scrambling to rewrite laws governing these systems (Toppo, 2009).

Appendix B Thematic Map

Underperformance	We Know What's Best	Cooperation	Status Quo Responds
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Turning around underperforming schools •Leadership •Progress •Think differently •Dropping out •Struggling to achieve •Failing •Competition •Don't have skills to succeed •Achievement gap •Not enough control •Money turning around worst school •Challenging subject matter •Rigorous standards •Equality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Challenges •Meritocracy •Othering •Every child can learn •Progress •Good things we've done •Quality •Superhero teachers •Want to be valued •Data •Proven strategies •Blame •Standards (common; testing; helping teachers master) •Leadership •Raising the bar •College readiness •Experts •Do the right thing* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Urgency •Compromise our future •Shared values •Moral obligation •Do the right thing* •Give the opportunity •We all share the same dreams •Call to action •Political courage •President called on us •Empowerment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •States respond •Falling into line •We're already in compliance •Teachers respond •Opposition and resistance •Worry and skepticism

*Some sub-categories fell under multiple themes

¹ The lived experience of teachers will be addressed in a second article that reports on our analysis of focus group interviews with experienced, practicing teachers.

² For more examples, see Appendix A.

³ For a complete list of all categories and themes, see Appendix B.

⁴ He also promises results: “you and I must”; “we need to work together”; “this is my promise. This is your promise. This is the American promise.”

⁵ For each speech, there is at least one reference to the President calling on “us,” implying both that *a*) we have this opportunity to give back to society, and *b*) we have to accept this challenge. In the Robust Data speech Duncan states, “the president and I need your help”; in the Charter School speech he states, “this is our chance”; in the NEA speech he states, “I ask you to join the President and I”; and in the governor’s speech he states, “the president called on us.”

⁶ Apple (2012) points out that politicians typically use this form of “crisis talk” as a means to shift the discussion onto their own terrain, ultimately fulfilling their own agenda. He states: “One of the major reasons for the continuation of dominant discourse and policies is that the very nature of our common sense about education is constantly being altered. This is largely the result of the power of particular groups who understand that if they can change the basic ways we think about our society and its institutions- and especially about our place in these institutions—they can create a set of policies that will profoundly benefit themselves—more than anyone else. Dominant groups have actively engaged in a vast social/pedagogical process, one in which what counts as a good school, good knowledge, good teaching, and good learning is being radically transformed. (p. x)

⁷ Walden Media, the production company responsible for financing these two films, mirrors Duncan’s claims about knowing what is best as evidenced by its websites (www.wbdtoolkit.com and www.waitingforsuperman.com), which provide ideas, resources, and encouragement for parents, teachers, and community members who want to “join the movement.” For example, the websites include information about Teach For America, a non-profit alternative teacher preparation program designed to place high-performing recent college graduates and professionals in hard-to-staff urban and rural school districts. Walden’s attempts to encourage this kind of “quality teacher” is even more apparent in the film *Won’t Back Down*, which features Michael Perry (played by Oscar Issac), the charismatic Adams Elementary music teacher who is a product of TFA. This inclusion suggests that TFA, a highly contested alternative to traditional teacher preparation programs (just as charter schools are an alternative to public schools), may, in fact, know the best way to prepare individuals to teach our struggling students.

⁸ Students and teachers are almost always objectified in the lexical makeup of the speeches, i.e. rarely given subject-positions.

⁹ See also, Gabor, A. (2010, September, 22). Why pay incentives are destined to fail. *Education Week*, 30(4), pp. 24, 28 and Springer, M., Ballou, D., Hamilton, L, Le, V., Lockwood, J., McCaffrey, D., Pepper, M., & Stecher, B. (2010). *Teacher pay for performance: Experimental evidence from the project on Incentives in Teaching*. Nashville, TN: National Center on Performance Initiatives at Vanderbilt University.

¹⁰ Currently, we embrace a method that works well for groups already on top. According to Gerson, (2012): “In public education, under the banner of ‘narrowing the achievement gap’ and encouraging ‘individuals’ right to choose,’ corporate billionaires posing as ‘educational reformers’ continue to advance their program of punitive high-stakes testing (using student scores as the basis for evaluation, paying, and retaining or firing teachers, as well as for closing or sanctioning schools); union-curbing; cuts to vital programs; and privatization (contracting out, proliferation of

charter schools” (p. 98).

Author Details

Ashlee Anderson, Ph.D.

Department of Educational Psychology & Counseling

University of Tennessee

1126 Volunteer Boulevard

418 Claxton Complex

Knoxville, TN 37996-3456

U.S.A.

Email: abanders@utk.edu

Brittany Aronson, Ph.D.

Miami University

College of Education, Health, and Society

Department of Educational Leadership

306-L McGuffey Hall

Oxford, OH 45056

U.S.A.

Email: aronsoba@miamioh.edu

Scott Ellison, Ph.D.

Department of Educational Psychology & Foundations

University of Northern Iowa

Schindler Educ Ctr 646

Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0607

U.S.A.

Email: bradley.ellison@uni.edu

Sherrie Fairchild-Keyes, Ph.D. Candidate

535 Jane & David Bailey Education Complex

1122 Volunteer Boulevard

Knoxville, Tennessee 37996-3452

U.S.A.

Email: sbradsh1@utk.edu