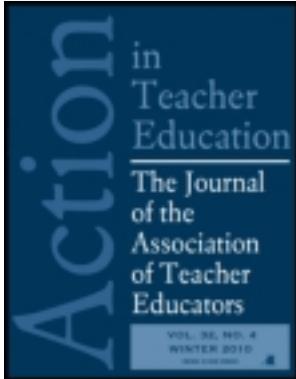


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Action in Teacher Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uate20>

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To cite this article: Wayne Journell & Lisa Brown Buchanan (2013) Confronting Educational Politics with Preservice Teachers: Reactions to Waiting for Superman, Action in Teacher Education, 35:4, 252-271, DOI: [10.1080/01626620.2013.827601](https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2013.827601)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2013.827601>

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# Confronting Educational Politics with Preservice Teachers: Reactions to *Waiting for Superman*

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Within the literature on teacher education in the United States, relatively little research has been conducted on how preservice teachers conceptualize popular depictions of the profession or issues related to the “extended professionalism” of teaching. In this study, the authors explore the reactions of elementary, middle, and secondary preservice teachers to *Waiting for Superman*, a controversial 2010 documentary about the American public education system, as an example of focused and deliberate engagement with aspects of teacher professionalism. Using surveys and focus group discussions, the authors sought to determine the effectiveness of *Waiting for Superman* in fostering student interest and engagement with issues related to the extended professionalism of teaching. The findings from this study illuminate a need for broaching issues of extended professionalism within teacher education programs as well as offer implications for the use of documentary films as a catalyst for discussions of issues related to the profession.

## INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this study can be traced back to an experience in the first author’s work with preservice social studies teachers in North Carolina. In early 2011, Scott Walker, the newly elected, fiscally conservative Republican governor of Wisconsin, proposed a state budget repair bill in which one of the main provisions called for a sizeable reduction in state employees’ health care plans and pensions while eliminating most of the collective bargaining rights of unions within the state. The subsequent protests over Governor Walker’s proposal garnered national attention, and although all state employees in Wisconsin would have been affected by the proposed legislation, public educators and teachers’ unions became the face of the opposition movement. Often, the nightly coverage of the conflict in Wisconsin would spur an ideological debate about the teaching profession in which many conservative pundits pointed at summer vacations and short workdays as justification for Walker’s proposal, and those on the other side

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of the political spectrum argued that teachers in the United States were underappreciated and underpaid.

At one point during the height of the Wisconsin standoff, the first author started his class by asking students for their reactions to the depictions of teachers being presented in the media. Only a handful of students were even aware of the situation in Wisconsin, and even fewer seemed to link the rhetoric being articulated in the media with a larger discourse about the profession they were about to enter in a few short months. This vignette is only representative of one impromptu discussion of teacher professionalism, but the students' general unawareness of prevalent views of teachers and the profession is alarming. Especially in light of recent events, such as the 2012 Chicago teachers' strike, that have thrust the professional status of teachers into the national spotlight, it is crucial that those about to enter the profession are aware of how it is perceived by those on the outside looking in.

We approached this study with Soder's (1991) belief that "if you define yourself (or let others define you) in ways that are limiting, the chances are greatly increased that your actions will become limited" (p. 301). We would argue, then, that part of being able to define oneself as a professional is being aware of how others perceive one's profession, and we believe that making preservice teachers aware of these perceptions is too often an overlooked aspect of teacher preparation. In this study, we explore the reactions of elementary, middle, and secondary preservice teachers to *Waiting for Superman*, a controversial 2010 documentary about the American public education system, as an example of focused and deliberate engagement with aspects of teacher professionalism.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Professionalism and Preservice Teachers

For decades, scholars have been debating the professional status of teachers. A quick perusal of prominent journals devoted to teacher education will uncover an array of arguments for teaching as a respected profession. *Action in Teacher Education*, for example, devoted a special issue to this question as recently as 2008 (Chiodo, 2008). Yet no clear consensus appears to exist regarding the professional status of teachers or best practices for educating preservice teachers about the profession.

Research suggests that even those within the profession have difficulty defining what makes teaching a profession. A recent study, for example, of more than 400 preservice and practicing teachers found that most (91%) viewed teaching as a profession, as opposed to a job. However, when asked to explain the rationale for their decision, they held conflicting reasons ranging from having a passion for their work to believing that teaching requires a unique set of skills learned through training (Martinez, Desiderio, & Papakonstantinou, 2010).

Perhaps one reason for this lack of a coherent definition is the ambiguity often surrounding the term *professionalism* in teacher education. In many teacher education programs, *professionalism* is defined in terms of looking/acting as a professional (e.g., dressing appropriately, being punctual) and behaving in an ethical fashion (e.g., Warnick & Silverman, 2011). This narrow view of professionalism, however, overlooks a broader engagement with the profession. For the purposes

of this discussion, then, we are choosing to use Hoyle's (1974) definition of *professionalism*, which encompasses micro- and macrovisions of professionalism.

Hoyle (1974) defines *professionalism* as the knowledge and skills used by teachers in their work. Hoyle makes a clear distinction between *professionalism* and *professionalism*, which he argues only refers to status-related aspects of an occupation (e.g., salary), and argues that professionalism is best explained in terms of an ideological continuum (Evans, 1997). On one end of the spectrum is "restricted" professionalism, which Hoyle defines as a narrow, classroom-based vision of education that is only related to the instructional practices of teaching. On the other is "extended" professionalism, which he defines as a wider vision of education, one that adopts a theoretical or intellectual approach to the teaching profession (Evans, 1997, 2008).

Teacher education programs too often focus exclusively on aspects of restricted professionalism without allowing for explorations of broader analyses of the profession. Neumann, Jones, and Webb (2012) argue, however, that teacher education programs do a disservice to preservice teachers when they gloss over political aspects of schooling. As they note,

Developing teachers' professional knowledge of leadership can do more than just raise teachers' awareness of the political nature of schools and their assumed roles within such organizations. It can help teachers draw upon a complex understanding of leadership so they may more effectively recognize, understand, and respond to motives of others during school reform efforts (p. 5).

They continue by stating that "Many teachers remain unaware that questions about power, professional knowledge, and leadership even exist in their work . . . and by that lack of recognition, teachers themselves do not recognize the power they wield" (p. 5). If, as Helsby (1995) argues, the idea of professionalism is socially constructed, "then teachers are potentially key players in that construction, accepting or resisting external control and asserting or denying their autonomy" (p. 320).

We argue, then, that teacher education programs must make a conscious effort to focus on extended professionalism as part of preservice teachers' professional preparation. Recent scholarship has argued for the inclusion of courses on professionalism and increased attention to public issues within teacher education programs (e.g., Warnick & Silverman, 2011; Yogev & Michaeli, 2011); yet few studies on how preservice teachers respond to elements of extended professionalism, such as Misco and Patterson's (2007) work on prospective social studies teachers' conceptualizations of academic freedom, exist within the literature. Awareness of professionalism issues is the first step to critical analysis, and in this study, we attempted to use documentary film as a way to increase awareness and broach discussions of these types of issues with our students.

### Film as an Instructional Tool in Preservice Teacher Education

There exists a growing literature base advocating the use of popular film as an instructional tool in preservice teacher education. If, as Trier (2001, 2005) argues, students conceptualize popular films as a type of cultural "text," then they offer considerable potential for educating preservice teachers about the personal and professional lives of teachers (e.g., Shaw & Nederhouser, 2005; Trier, 2001, 2005, 2010a, 2010b). As Ryan and Townsend (2012) note, "Any of the many characterizations of teachers in popular media, positive and negative, can be accessed and analyzed by teacher candidates themselves to foster significant, critical reflection about what it means to be a teacher" (p. 246).

Much has been written about the ways in which teachers have been represented in popular American film, typically either in unflattering terms or as heroes who save children from lives of poverty and despair (e.g., Ayers, 1994; Raimo, Devlin-Scherer, & Zinicola, 2002). However, much of this analysis has focused on fictional accounts of teaching. In this study, we use documentary film as a way to encourage preservice teachers to critically analyze the public perception of teaching in the United States and engage in discussions of political issues related to the profession, such as teacher tenure and merit pay.

Recent studies suggest that educational documentaries can be a powerful instructional tool for preservice teacher education (e.g., Buchanan, 2012; Jensen, Janak, & Slater, 2012; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011). In a study using the documentary *Beyond the Bricks*, for example, Sealey-Ruiz (2011) found that the film created a starting point for preservice and practicing teachers to discuss race and racism within the American public education system. Many preservice teachers may normally find it challenging to discuss such abstract concepts, especially if they have not had relatable prior experiences, but popular media can help facilitate higher levels of reflection of these critical educational issues by forcing them to emotionally react to a certain depiction (Ryan & Townsend, 2012).

Although documentaries may appear to paint a more realistic portrayal of an issue than a typical Hollywood film, teachers using documentaries as part of their instruction must proceed cautiously. Documentaries typically are made to raise awareness of a perceived social problem; however, they often only present one ideological perspective on an issue, usually that of the filmmaker. It is essential, therefore, that teachers make students aware of the inherent biases associated with documentaries before using them in their classrooms (Hess, 2007; Marcus & Stoddard, 2009; Stoddard, 2009).

The documentary featured in this study, *Waiting for Superman* (Guggenheim, 2010), confronts the issue of inequality within public education in the United States. Released in 2010 to considerable fanfare, the film's central premise is that the American educational system is fundamentally flawed. Award-winning director Davis Guggenheim makes a compelling argument that certain institutional factors, namely, low expectations, tracking, and union protection of poor teachers, have created a vicious cycle of social reproduction in which the only way for those mired within a failing school system to break out is through sheer luck.

The primary focus of the film is the personal stories of five students who attend failing public schools and who have applied for entry into local charter schools where graduation rates are exceptional, test scores are high, and the vast majority of students go on to attend college. In each case, however, the number of applicants far exceeds the number of openings, and admission decisions are ultimately decided by a random lottery. The film reaches its climax during each of the respective lottery drawings; numbers are continuously being drawn while a graphic at the bottom of the screen simultaneously counts down the remaining number of available slots. Ultimately, only two of the five students receive admission and, presumably, a path to a better life, whereas the remaining three return to the failing schools from which they had hoped to escape.

Intermingled among the storylines of these five students and their families are in-depth descriptions of the various charter schools to which the students are applying and coverage of the public battle between Michelle Rhee, former chancellor of Public Education in Washington, D.C. who sought to remove failing teachers regardless of tenure status and institute merit pay within the District, and the local teachers' union. Rhee and the leaders of the various charter schools

are hailed as visionaries while ineffective teachers and the systems that protect them, namely, teachers' unions, are cast as villains. Throughout the film, Guggenheim repeatedly asserts that high-quality teachers are the most important aspect of a child's education; however, the film insinuates that a sizeable percentage of the teaching force in the United States is doing a disservice to students and that there is little administrators can do to remove poor teachers from their positions once they have achieved tenure.

The critical reception for *Waiting for Superman* was mixed. The film was generally well received by film critics for contributing to the debate on public education in the United States and for, as Roger Ebert (2010) noted, showing that "a good education . . . is not ruled out by poverty, uneducated parents, or crime-and-drug infested neighborhoods." The response to the film by educators was generally more negative. Diane Ravitch (2010) and others in academia (e.g., Sadovnik, 2011) openly questioned the accuracy of many aspects of the film, particularly the insinuation that charter schools consistently outperform public schools and, thereby, should be viewed as the solution to public education in the United States. Regardless of how one interprets *Waiting for Superman*, it is clear the film makes a powerful statement about public education in the United States, one that has received considerable national attention.

Despite its notoriety, few scholars have attempted to analyze the educational impact of *Waiting for Superman* with preservice teachers. In our research, we only found one study in which researchers sought to measure the impact of the film on students' views of public education. In their study, Jensen et al. (2012) showed *Waiting for Superman* as part of an educational foundations course and collected survey data from 27 students before and after viewing. Their analysis showed that there was "significant change" (p. 27) in students' attitudes and beliefs toward teachers' unions and charter schools. They then held a focus group interview with six of the students and found that the interview data seemed to contradict the survey results. Although the sample size was small, these six students stated that the film had little effect on how they viewed public education.

In this study, we seek to build on this knowledge by using *Waiting for Superman* as a way to facilitate discussions of issues related to the extended professionalism of teaching. We believe that preservice teachers should be aware of the educational politics surrounding many of the controversial claims found in *Waiting for Superman*, and we used the film as a way to broach many of these issues with our students. Specifically, we sought answers to the following questions: (1) To what extent were our elementary, middle, and secondary preservice teachers familiar with *Waiting for Superman* and the educational issues described in the film prior to viewing? (2) How would these preservice teachers react to the depictions of teachers and teaching presented in the film? and (3) How effective would the film be in fostering student interest and engagement with issues related to the extended professionalism of teaching?

## METHOD

Data were collected using a multiple case study approach, which is effective for providing insight into a particular issue through the examination of several bounded systems (Stake, 1995). Data were analyzed using within-case and across-case analytical approaches (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All data were first analyzed within each individual case, and then patterns common to all three cases were also identified. Although the findings are only generalizable to the specific

cases outlined below, the cross-case comparisons provide greater data reliability and increase the likelihood that others may be able to transfer these findings to similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Participants

The participants in this study were elementary, middle, and secondary preservice teachers enrolled in social studies methods courses during the Fall 2011 semester. The first author taught the middle and secondary methods courses, and the second author taught the elementary methods course. Participation in the study was optional for students as it was one of several ways in which students could receive extra credit in their methods courses.

Seventeen elementary preservice teachers participated in the study. These students were juniors and were taking social studies methods as part of their licensure requirements. All of the students were undergraduates seeking initial licensure, and all were White. Fifteen of the students were female, and two were male.

The 11 middle-grades preservice teachers who participated in the study were taking methods as part of their requirements for social studies licensure. All but one of the middle-grades students who participated in the study were undergraduates in the junior year of their program; the remaining student was an alternative-licensure student. Seven of the students were female, and four were male. Nine of the students were White, and two were African American.

Eighteen secondary preservice teachers took part in the study. These students were majoring in a relevant content area (e.g., history, political science) and taking social studies methods during their senior year as part of their required coursework for licensure. Fifteen of the students were undergraduates, and three were alternative-licensure students. Ten of the students were female, and eight were male. Sixteen were White, and the remaining two students were African American.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Students from each of the three classes participated in the study separately; however, the same procedures were used in each class. Prior to viewing *Waiting for Superman*, students completed a short survey consisting of 10 Likert-type statements and five open-ended questions. The Likert-type statements asked students to assess their feelings about public education and knowledge of several topics discussed in the film, such as charter schools and teacher tenure. The open-ended questions asked students to identify the following people or terms: Arnie Duncan (the Secretary of Education), Michelle Rhee, Randi Weingarten (the president of the American Federation of Teachers), Race to the Top, and charter schools.

Following the survey, students watched *Waiting for Superman*. No discussion occurred during the movie, and the movie was played without interruption. After the film, students filled out another short survey containing the same 10 Likert-type statements that were on the presurvey, as well as six additional Likert-type statements that required students to reflect upon their feelings about the content of the film.

Once students completed the postsurvey, both authors led a focus group discussion (Maxwell, 2005) in which students were asked to give their reactions to *Waiting for Superman* and the various educational issues present in the film. The discussion was designed as a seminar (Parker

& Hess, 2001) in that the purpose was to seek a variety of opinions about the issues addressed in the film rather than develop a plan of action for how to remedy any of those issues. The authors acted as facilitators in that students were encouraged to carry the discussion themselves; the authors only intervened to clarify information or to introduce new topics once the conversation had stalled. The discussion in each of the classes lasted approximately one hour and was audiotaped and transcribed for accuracy.

We engaged in an issues-focused analysis (Weiss, 1994) of the discussion transcripts in which we read each transcript and identified areas of interest, specifically items related to our students' reactions to *Waiting for Superman* and how they conceptualized topics related to professionalism that emerged from the film. Based on these items of interest, we developed themes and went back through the transcripts in an attempt to identify relevant patterns within the data based on the themes we had established (Stake, 1995). We completed this process for each of the three individual cases and then went back and conducted a cross-case analysis and identified patterns that were common among all three cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, we compared the patterns that emerged with the survey data to paint a more complete picture of our students' reactions to the professional issues that were raised in the film.

## FINDINGS

### Previewing Data

The survey data collected from the preservice teachers in all three groups prior to viewing *Waiting for Superman* suggest that most of them were not familiar with either the film or many of the prominent issues addressed in the film. Despite the critical acclaim and widespread publicity received by *Waiting for Superman* upon its release, only eight of the 46 preservice teachers (six elementary and two secondary) had seen the film prior to taking part in the study. Students' responses to the Likert-type statements also suggest a general uncertainty about many of the issues addressed in the film.

Interestingly, the responses to all statements are similar among the students in all three groups. They generally seem to agree that the public education system in the United States is not perfect and that the system often privileges some students over others. When asked about charter schools and teachers' unions, two issues prominently featured in *Waiting for Superman*, the students' responses suggest that most did not feel very knowledgeable about either topic. With respect to teachers' unions, a possible reason for the students' lack of knowledge is that this study took place in North Carolina, which is a "right to work" state and forbids collective-bargaining for teachers.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, of the issues addressed in the survey, the one that was received most positively by students was the idea of teacher tenure, which is not overly surprising because the vast majority of these students were hoping to enter the profession in the near future. In North Carolina, teacher

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<sup>1</sup>Teachers' unions do exist in North Carolina, despite the state's right to work status. These unions have paid memberships and offer teachers numerous benefits, ranging from health care discounts to legal support. However, they cannot engage in collective bargaining for salary and other benefits in teachers' contracts.

TABLE 1  
Students' Presurvey Responses by Class

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Elementary</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>Secondary</i>
I believe the public education system in the United States is broken	4.11 (0.78)	3.18 (0.87)	3.5 (0.85)
I believe the public education system in the United States treats most students fairly	2.23 (0.97)	2.18 (0.60)	2.55 (0.92)
I am knowledgeable about charter schools	2.47 (1.32)	2.54 (1.29)	2.5 (1.29)
I believe charter schools are good for the American educational system	3.11 (0.92)	2.72 (0.64)	3.16 (0.78)
I would like to teach at a charter school	3.05 (1.19)	2.45 (0.82)	3.05 (0.99)
I am knowledgeable about teachers' unions in the United States	2.35 (0.99)	2.36 (1.28)	2.44 (1.04)
I believe teachers' unions are good for the American educational system	3.17 (0.52)	3.00 (1.00)	3.44 (0.98)
I plan on joining a teachers' union if I become a teacher	2.82 (0.52)	3.00 (1.26)	3.38 (0.84)
I believe public school teachers in the United States should receive tenure	3.58 (1.50)	4.00 (1.00)	3.61 (0.91)
I am aware of the political decisions that affect public education in the United States	3.29 (1.26)	3.54 (0.82)	4.00 (0.76)

Note. The mean score is given with the standard deviation in parenthesis.

tenure is allowed via state legislation and granted after 4 years.<sup>2</sup> It is important, therefore, to place these initial survey results into a proper context as students' experiences growing up in a state that allowed for teacher tenure but not unionized collective-bargaining for teachers most likely affected their knowledge of and feelings toward these issues.

Students' responses to the open-ended questions, however, also suggest a general unawareness with several of the key individuals and issues depicted in *Waiting for Superman* or associated with current federal education policy in the United States, which, again, is not overly surprising given previous research on preservice social studies teachers' poor knowledge of politics and social issues (e.g., Doppen et al., 2011; Journell, 2013). A total of three students, all in the middle-grades group, were able to correctly identify Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan. The same number (one from each group) was able to identify former DC Chancellor of Schools, Michelle Rhee. None of the students in the study were able to identify Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers.

Determining whether students had knowledge of charter schools or President Obama's Race to the Top initiative was more challenging, in part, because many students wrote generic definitions that did not really convey a true understanding of either term. Only seven students (three

<sup>2</sup>Teacher tenure is granted to public school educators in North Carolina through the "System of Employment for Public School Teachers" (North Carolina General Assembly, 1993). Recently, however, Republican legislators in the North Carolina Senate have introduced legislation eliminating teacher tenure (Mercola, 2012). As of this writing, the legislation has passed through the Senate education committee but has not received a vote on the Senate floor.

middle grades and four secondary) were able to identify *Race to the Top* as either an initiative of the Obama administration or as a competition among states for federal money. Many students incorrectly characterized it as a competition among schools or as legislation similar to No Child Left Behind in which teachers are held accountable for ensuring that all students meet established benchmarks. Similarly, only eight students (one elementary, four middle grades, and three secondary) were able to correctly define charter schools as a type of public school that operates on an established charter in which students have to be admitted, oftentimes through a lottery. The majority of students equated charter schools either with private schools where students have to pay for admission or magnet schools where students learn from a specialized curriculum.

### Postviewing Data

The results of the postviewing survey were similar to findings from previous research (Jensen et al., 2012) that suggest students in all three groups were affected by the film's depiction of the profession. As Table 2 shows, students' opinions seemed to be influenced by the ideological perspectives of the film as their feelings on teacher tenure and teachers' unions became more negative and their opinions on charter schools became more positive as a result of watching the film.

When asked specifically about the film, students felt that *Waiting for Superman* had made them more informed about the profession, although they were less certain about whether the film had presented an accurate portrayal of public education in the United States. Not only did the negative depiction of public education in the film not appear to dissuade students from the profession, but it also seemed to reinforce for students the system of teacher accountability that has been prominent in the United States since the passage of No Child Left Behind.

Based on the focus group discussions that occurred after each group of students viewed *Waiting for Superman*, it was clear that Guggenheim's portrayal of public education in the United States had made many of the students think more critically about their future professions and the ways in which teaching is often represented in popular media. As we analyzed the transcripts of each discussion, we found the conversations that occurred in each of the three groups to be strikingly similar. In each discussion, students made comments that suggested a newfound awareness of the educational inequities addressed in the film, and those comments were often quickly tempered by students who questioned the director's biases and the accuracy of the information presented. In each group, the discussion then turned to specific issues related to the profession depicted in the film, namely, teacher tenure, merit pay, and the political influence of teachers' unions. The remainder of this section will further illustrate each of these themes.

*Awareness of inequity.* It is evident to anyone who has ever viewed *Waiting for Superman* that Guggenheim intended for the audience to become emotionally attached to the five students and their families who were applying for admission to charter schools in hopes of better educational opportunities. It was clear, even before the film had ended, that Guggenheim had achieved his goal among the students in this study, as one or two preservice teachers in each group could be seen brushing back tears as the number of available spots at each charter school dwindled. Then, when asked to give their reactions to the film, inevitably the first comments spoke to the emotional toll of the film, as the following exchange from the secondary group shows:

TABLE 2  
Postviewing Survey Data

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Elementary</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>Secondary</i>
I believe the public education system in the United States is broken	4.76 (0.43)	4.27 (1.19)	4.11 (1.13)
I believe the public education system in the United States treats most students fairly	1.41 (0.50)	1.54 (0.68)	1.88 (0.83)
I am knowledgeable about charter schools	4.05 (0.65)	4.18 (0.60)	4.11 (0.67)
I believe charter schools are good for the American educational system	4.00 (0.93)	3.90 (0.70)	3.94 (1.05)
I would like to teach at a charter school	3.52 (1.32)	3.18 (1.32)	3.77 (1.00)
I am knowledgeable about teachers' unions in the United States	3.17 (0.95)	3.81 (0.87)	3.61 (0.69)
I believe teachers' unions are good for the American educational system	2.00 (1.06)	2.72 (1.48)	2.00 (0.76)
I plan on joining a teachers' union if I become a teacher	2.05 (0.96)	2.09 (1.30)	2.00 (0.90)
I believe public school teachers in the United States should receive tenure	1.76 (0.83)	2.18 (1.40)	2.16 (1.04)
I am aware of the political decisions that affect public education in the United States	3.17 (1.07)	3.63 (1.12)	4.16 (0.70)
I believe <i>Waiting for Superman</i> provided an accurate portrayal of public education in the United States	4.00 (0.70)	3.63 (1.20)	4.00 (0.90)
After watching <i>Waiting for Superman</i> , I know more about the public education system in the United States than I did before watching the movie	4.23 (0.75)	4.54 (0.93)	4.33 (0.59)
<i>Waiting for Superman</i> made me question whether I still want to be a teacher	1.47 (0.62)	1.18 (0.40)	2.05 (1.34)
<i>Waiting for Superman</i> changed the way I view public education in the United States	3.76 (0.97)	3.54 (1.29)	3.33 (1.13)
After watching <i>Waiting for Superman</i> , I believe teachers need to be held accountable for student learning	4.47 (0.79)	4.54 (0.68)	4.44 (0.61)

Note. The mean score is given with the standard deviation in parentheses.

Author: So, the first question, obviously, I guess, to start out with is, what did you think?

Student: Sad.

Author: Alright, sad. Why? Elaborate.

Student: Sad because, you know, they're little kids. It's not fair to them. You know. It's really hard for me to talk about it. I'm still kind of emotional from watching the movie.

In another example, students in the elementary group described the film as “depressing,” and others admitted “sitting there with my fingers crossed” as the students in the film waited on the lottery results or being dismayed that the middle-class White student was the only student among the five chronicled in the film who got her lottery number called because “she was the only one that would have been okay if she had to go to [her former school].” Another student seemed shocked at the realism of the film, stating that “I thought it was going to be just like any other movie where, ‘oh, yeah, sure, the last one, they get called’ but [it wasn’t].”

However, at least one student in the secondary group had a different take on the film. He stated,

I guess I didn't really feel sad or anything. What I feel most from the movie is motivated. You know? Motivated to seek change. They address a lot of problems that we have in the education system and, you know, I think these are problems that I need to challenge myself to address.

This student's response is representative of many comments made by students that suggested *Waiting for Superman* had made them more aware of educational inequities in the United States. Comments made in each group suggested that at least some of the students had bought Guggenheim's argument that inadequate schools and poor teachers were failing students, as opposed to students being byproducts of failing neighborhoods, as this excerpt from the middle-grades group shows:

Student: My favorite part was when they said it was always thought of that the neighborhood determined the school, but it's actually the school that determines the neighborhood.

Author: Do you agree with it?

Student: Yeah, partly. Because we blame a lot on that [students] are poverty stricken and, I mean, everything doesn't go back to that. It's what we are doing and where they spend 7 hours a day, 5 days a week.

Student: That was my reaction. And then, she said the key word *blame*. There's always got to be blame. And it gets passed around all the time . . . it gets blamed to the school and then school blames the parents and the parents blame the government. I mean, I don't know. It gets passed around an awful lot.

Based on the collective comments made in each of the three groups, it seemed clear that *Waiting for Superman* had placed a spotlight on an ugly aspect of public education in the United States of which some students were unaware, at least to the extent it was portrayed in the film. Although students in all three groups seemed generally accepting of Guggenheim's argument, many of the decisions he made in framing that argument were a source of criticism for students.

*Criticisms of Guggenheim's portrayal of educational inequity.* In each group, but especially the middle and secondary groups, initial expressions of emotion soon gave way to students criticizing the accuracy of the information contained in the film. As one secondary student complained, "I felt like it was really biased. I mean it obviously was. But that's why I couldn't take it seriously. I didn't want to make an opinion because I just knew that it was so one sided." An elementary student noted that all documentaries were inherently biased when she stated, "And that's all editing, too. I mean, documentaries we have seen, the directors put their spin on it, and they can edit it to make it seem however they want it to seem." In particular, students charged Guggenheim with selectively choosing the five students chronicled in the film to exaggerate the problems that plague the American public education system. As one secondary student noted,

I thought the movie did a really good job showing, like, the flaws in public school but I kind of felt—and it was emotionally draining what they did with the lotteries—but I think that it would have been more encompassing if they would have put more suburban schools in there. Because they only put one and I'm still like, they kind of said some figures and some facts but they didn't show, like, a suburban school in different states and different parts of the state like they did with the urban schools. So, I kind of feel it showed more flaws, so maybe there are some more positives in other places.

Students in all three groups also were critical of the film's portrayal of charter schools as the solution to the problems that plague public education in the United States. As one secondary student argued,

I really did not like the fact that these guys are showing how well the charter schools are doing and all that, but they've got an all-star teaching staff. They've got a faculty and administration that is there to help them as well. You go to the schools that may have good teachers but they just don't have the backup and the parents aren't involved like they are. The parents were crying when their kids weren't going to these [charter] schools. The parents aren't involved in a lot of these [traditional public] schools. The administration is no help. So, I didn't like the fact that they're showing all teachers as being bad, really. Like a collective bad guy. Because I've seen plenty of great teachers in not so well off schools with no help thrive.

In each group, students supported their critiques of the film's representation of charter schools with their internship experiences or their personal knowledge of charter schools. As one middle-grades student remarked,

I was critical when I was looking at the classrooms in the charter schools because it showed how successful they were. Well, I counted the kids and there is about twenty kids in there versus like I am sure some of us have seen, like, up to 33 kids in one of my [internship] classes. So, I feel like, yes, teachers should be held accountable, but look at the environment in these charter schools versus the public schools. And this lottery system, the kids are like motivated to go there because it is a privilege. But public school, they can all but shoot somebody and they're still in. I mean, we can't kick them out, and I am not saying we should. I am just saying, like, it's not some kind of privilege to go to public schools. So, part of it is the paradigm that they're operating with . . . I just, I don't think charter schools are necessarily the answer. And I think we can explain why they have so much more success than the public schools. If the public school had the same, you know, environment, then I'm sure they would be successful too.

Interestingly, only two students, both in the elementary group, admitted to having attended a charter school at some point in their lives. The two students had vastly different experiences, and this discrepancy seemed to further claims that Guggenheim had only elected to feature high-performing charter schools in the film. One student described her experience with charter schools by telling the following story:

I visited the charter school in our district and the charter school promised each individual student will have laptops and they will have all these great things that you don't have in public school . . . And when I actually went to the charter school, nothing that they promised was going on. And on various occasions, they actually lost students. Like students would wander out because no one was watching them. None of the teachers there were certified. It was just an awful situation. So, I feel like in this movie, they were portrayed very positively, but in my experience, they were just awful.

Yet her classmate offered a contrasting perspective. She described her charter school experience in the following way,

My middle school was attached to a museum, so we did tons of work in the museum. It was a very hands-on school. I need small schools, which is why I went there. And we only had sixteen kids in our class, and I got to know all of them really well. And we did lots of community work and it brought me out of my shell, because I am not one to, like, start something. But there, it was, like, you have no

choice. So, it wasn't as much test-driven. It was more "Explain to me why you think this," and so, it made me think in a different way. It really worked for me.

Overall, the portrayal of charter schools and teachers in *Waiting for Superman* was a source of contention for many of the students in this study, in part, because they were able to compare Guggenheim's depiction to their prior understandings of classroom instruction or experience with charter schools. However, when the focus of the discussion turned to issues of professionalism that were present in the film, it was clear that students had less of a prior framework from which to base their reactions.

*Discussing issues of professionalism.* *Waiting for Superman* led to spirited discussions in each of the three groups about issues related to teacher tenure, merit pay, and teachers' unions, topics to which most students admitted they had not received extensive exposure in their professional training. Similar to the discussions about charter schools that occurred in each group, students realized that the film's depiction of teacher tenure and teachers' unions was slanted to fit a certain ideological perspective. As one secondary student noted,

I mean, granted, we may wind up agreeing with this perspective that the teachers' union is bad, but there was not a real fair interview for them [in the film]. You know, you don't hear what their stances are, what good things they do. You're just kind of left with, okay, they're just bad people.

Despite the obvious bias present in the film, Guggenheim's claims served as a starting point for each group to unpack multiple perspectives about each of these issues. Due to space considerations and the fact that the tenor and substance of the discussion was similar in each group, we are choosing to only share aspects of the middle-grades students' conversation.

Prior to watching *Waiting for Superman*, it seemed as though most of the students who took part in this study generally viewed the idea of teacher tenure in a positive way. However, images of the infamous "rubber rooms" in New York and descriptions of the "lemon dances" in which ineffective teachers are shuffled from school to school offered another side of the tenure argument for students to consider. As one student noted,

I never really thought about tenure in that way. I kind of thought it was like a protective thing for teachers, but now that I have it in a perspective of teachers being lazy about it and once they get tenure, they're like, "Oh, you know, our job is saved and protected." It definitely puts a new perspective in my head.

One of her classmates responded in kind, stating,

I believe that tenure can be a good thing for teachers, certainly. But the way that it's being skewed and used kind of in a very negative way has almost killed it for everybody. It's almost got to be revamped for it to work. And, you know, like [the film] said, professors go through a whole lot more. It means so much more. It means a reward. It means that they've really achieved something special. It's not just because you've been in there for a long enough time.

As students began unpacking the arguments for and against teacher tenure, a common theme quickly emerged: students seemed to be in general agreement that "bad" teachers should be removed from their jobs, regardless of tenure, but most did not view themselves in the same light as the teachers portrayed in the film and, therefore, still wanted the protection of tenure for themselves. Consider the following excerpt from the discussion:

Student: I think that there should be certain benefits once you've been there for so long. But I don't think that there is anything that should say that you can't be fired. Like I think if you are a distinguished teacher and you do what you should do, then they shouldn't be thinking about firing you. I mean, I know there are elements that play in with politics and all that stuff of firing teachers, but I mean, I don't really think there should be a "you can't get fired." I think that is just an easy way out for teachers to get lazy.

Student: I feel like, if you're not doing the job in the school that you are at and older teachers, I mean, some of them are really good and they're really innovative and they really want to learn the new ways that we are taught, but some of them don't. Like they are so close to retirement that they're not worried about trying to find new ways to teach. They're going to use the same lesson plans they did when they were new teachers. And I feel like passing them around to another school is not going to help anybody. It's just going to make them somebody else's problem. So, if you're not doing the job that you need to do for the students and producing the results that they need, then I don't think that you need to be a teacher.

Author: So, let me ask you a question. In 2 years, you're going to be a teacher. Are you going to forego your tenure? [short silence]

Student: I'm not!

Student: It just seems very strange that this is a job that does this. Is it just that there is so many little pieces that we could get fired for that they have to have some kind of protection for us? I mean, because it is a very odd thing to give teachers when there's really. . . . This is not necessarily the case in any other jobs, that okay, once you hit this point, you can't be fired. That's just a strange balance to me.

Student: I am going to hold onto tenure because . . . I mean, you want your job security, but I also know myself and I also know that I've always had this passion to be a teacher. I have the self-motivation to want to do good even though I do have job security. I mean, I want my kids to perform well and so I am going to teach them well. But then you have people, you don't know how many people I've talked to that come into college—nursing majors, pre-med—and then they change their major. What do they usually change it to? Elementary education. And they do it because it is easy. It's not easy. And these are the people that we are giving tenure to that can't . . . I mean, that have no motivation at all. They wanted to be nurses. They wanted to be doctors. But it was too hard. So, they changed it to something easier. And, I mean, that is what is wrong.

Only one student articulated that she would be willing to forego her tenure, in part, because she viewed herself as a motivated teacher. She noted that

I feel like . . . a lot of us are self-motivated enough to the point where we don't want to be that teacher who is going to stop after ten years. I mean, I want my job security, but at the same time, I think I would forego tenure. If I ever get to the point where I am doing more damage than good for kids, I don't think I need to be in the classroom for myself or anybody. I just don't think that if you are going to do damage to kids, that you should be in a classroom. So, I think that people who do switch to education because they think it is easier, because they think it is safe, then I don't think they

need tenure either. I think that the ones of us who actually want to be in it, we can keep our jobs and we can stay motivated with or without it.

As in the film, the discussion of teacher tenure often connected with closely-related issues of merit pay and the political influence of teachers' unions. Similar to the discussion on teacher tenure, students articulated differing opinions, as this excerpt shows:

Student: I am kind of surprised because you guys covered the tenure thing and, to me, the tenure thing . . . the bigger issue is, I think, that a lot of you skipped right over, which it really gets on my nerves because I hate unions. I think unions have ruined this country. . . . They can't change the tenure argument unless you get rid of the union or make an agreement with the union . . . I think the federal government should just make a pact to get rid of these unions because, I mean, what are we doing? . . . And then they say they are representing you. Well, you saw how they are representing teachers. They were saying, "Well, don't cut our paychecks" because every single one of them are for getting paid. That is why they don't want to take a vote at all. Because they are making money. You think they are going to say, "Oh, fire me. Get rid of the union"? Of course they're not.

Author: Now, let's play devil's advocate here for a second. What would Randi Weingarten, who is the head of the AFT that you saw [in the film], she is kind of vilified in this movie, right? If there was a villain in the movie, I think that she is the one that is probably vilified . . . what would be her argument of what unions do? What is their function?

Student: Well, they protect the little guy. That is what unions are all about. So that the little guy has a say in something. And, collectively, they have a strong voice. And I would disagree with [the previous student speaker], respectfully, that I do think that there is a place for unions. Have they been corrupted? Absolutely, they have in some places. Especially in big cities and, you know, you get the mob involved . . . but I think there is a place, and I think it does give the blue-collar man a voice collectively.

Many of the comments focused specifically on the blocked union vote of Rhee's proposal that would have reduced teachers' salaries considerably but would then have given them the opportunity to make six-figure salaries based on exceptional performance. Many students seemed to agree with the idea of merit pay in theory, as exemplified by the student who said,

I kind of think the merit pay, well, not docking them down to \$27,000 a year, but I think it has some good things about it. Because, I mean, why pay a teacher who is going to come in and kick ass and do everything the right way like your new innovative teachers and then pay the teachers who do the same thing over and over again every year, and they are making, like, twice as much as we are, but we are getting the results. I just don't think it is right.

Yet, when prodded to think more critically about the idea of merit pay, students started raising concerns about how salaries would be determined and how teachers would be evaluated. For example, students agreed that test scores would be a logical way of measuring teacher performance; however, when asked how they would evaluate teachers of nontested subjects, such as middle-grades social studies in North Carolina, students could not articulate a fair way to conduct teacher evaluations. As one student finally concluded,

There are so many other issues that come into play that can make or break what happens. So, I don't think that there is a true scale for merit pay as far as the teacher is concerned. I think the whole system should be revamped . . . and unfortunately, the people that seem to be making those reforms along the way aren't necessarily making them for the betterment of what is going on. It seems like they are making these to make themselves look really good because they are trying to make a difference. But it's not really being thought through by people who know the system.

Overall, it appeared as though the combination of viewing and discussing the film had led students to develop a deeper and more critical understanding of these extended professionalism issues. To provide a counter-narrative to *Waiting for Superman*, students were e-mailed a copy of Ravitch's (2010) critique of the film as well as a link to her (2011) address at the 2011 American Educational Research Association meeting titled, "Who Kidnapped Superman?" Although we have no way of knowing whether students continued these discussions of professionalism beyond the scope of the study, it was clear from the responses across the three focus groups that the opportunity to view *Waiting for Superman* had elicited engagement with issues of professionalism to which they had not yet been exposed in their teacher education program.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to illustrate how documentary film, specifically *Waiting for Superman*, could be used to introduce issues of extended professionalism that too often fall through the cracks of many teacher education programs. Obviously, the findings from this study cannot be generalized beyond the three groups of students presented here; however, we suspect that our program is not unique with respect to students' lack of knowledge about many of the issues present in *Waiting for Superman*. As we reflected on the coursework that our students take, we realized that, for many of our students, their conceptualization of professionalism was confined to issues such as being punctual to internships and dressing appropriately for the classroom.

Those aspects of professionalism are certainly important; however, we believe that larger issues of extended professionalism, such as being aware of how others' view one's profession, are also essential to the development of preservice teachers. As several students noted toward the end of the focus group interviews, teaching is one of the few professions in the United States where decisions that affect members of the profession are made largely by individuals outside the profession. Documentaries and other aspects of popular culture that take stances on aspects of public education have the ability to influence the decision making of those in power as well as the voters who are charged with deciding whether those individuals remain in power. Therefore, we would argue that teacher-educators have a responsibility to bring educational politics into their classrooms, especially when teachers are being depicted in ways that could be damaging to the profession.

Perhaps even more concerning is our students' general lack of knowledge about several issues related to public education prior to viewing *Waiting for Superman*, namely, charter schools and teachers' unions. Again, as teacher-educators, we have the responsibility to help students with many of the decisions they will face once they leave our institutions. Decisions on whether to join a teachers' union or the type of school at which one wishes to teach are inherently personal,

but teacher education programs should at least provide students with a wide range of information that they can use to make those decisions.

We also believe that educational documentaries are beneficial because they allow preservice teachers to think critically about professional issues that transcend their specific contexts. For example, much of what was discussed about teachers' unions in *Waiting for Superman* will have little personal impact on these preservice teachers should they decide to work in North Carolina after graduation. As the fallout from recent labor disputes in Chicago and Wisconsin show, however, attacks on the teaching profession rarely take context into account. In other words, how teachers are viewed in certain contexts affects the professional status of teachers everywhere.

Even on the issue of teacher tenure, a fundamental right of teachers in most states, including North Carolina, *Waiting for Superman* seemed to make students aware of a counterargument that many of them had not yet considered. In general, it appeared as though being confronted with Guggenheim's ideological perspective, even if it was not the perspective they personally advocated, encouraged our students to think critically about these extended professionalism issues. As the profession becomes increasingly contested, especially in light of shrinking state budgets, it will be essential that preservice teachers become discerning consumers of educational politics (Neumann et al., 2012), and the skills that they learn from critically analyzing popular depictions of the profession will serve them well as future professionals.

## CONCLUSION

We believe that this study supports prior work on the use of film as an effective instructional strategy in preservice teacher education. Although the majority of work in this area has been on the cinematic representation of teaching in Hollywood films, this study suggests that documentaries about education have the potential to serve as a springboard for serious discussions about issues related to the profession. We chose *Waiting for Superman* for this study because of its critical acclaim and notoriety; however, there are numerous, lesser-known documentaries about education that could also be used in teacher education classrooms (Ravitch, 2010; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011).

We conclude, then, with a few recommendations for those wishing to use educational documentaries with their preservice teachers. First, when using documentaries for educational purposes, it is important to remember that the goal should be engagement with issues, not a search for truth. All documentaries are framed within a certain perspective, and the claims made in the film, no matter how outrageous or unfounded, can be used as a starting point for discussion. A well-crafted documentary will elicit emotion and make viewers want to know more about a topic, which creates the perfect environment for students to consider multiple perspectives about an issue. In this study, it was evident from the differing perspectives that emerged during the subsequent discussion that simply watching *Waiting for Superman* did not provide enough context for students to critically analyze Guggenheim's depiction of American public education. Being able to hear others' opinions about the film often seemed to help clarify students' own perceptions.

Given the inherent bias in documentaries, a single documentary should never act as the lone source on any controversial issue. Students should always be given resources that provide evidence for the counternarrative to any documentary for them to be able to make informed professional decisions. In this study, we provided students with text and video-based

counternarratives, but one limitation of our instruction is that we had no way of knowing whether our students took the time to read/watch them. Because we did not have time in our methods classes to revisit the discussion that occurred after *Waiting for Superman*, we were unable to determine whether students were able to make sense of the competing narratives.

This leads to perhaps the biggest issue facing teacher–educators who wish to use documentary film in their classes—time. Our program is probably similar to most throughout the United States in that it does not have a course in which engagement with extended professionalism topics are specific learning objectives. In our program, and we suspect in many others, these topics often come under the purview of methods courses, which are usually filled to the brim as it is. We chose to address this issue by offering students extra credit to attend a screening of the film beyond normal class meeting times. The downside, of course, is that although the vast majority of our students attended, not all of our students chose to participate.

Further research is needed to determine best practices for integrating extended professionalism issues and the use of educational documentaries into methods coursework and other teacher education courses. We view extended professionalism as a theme that should, ideally, be interwoven throughout all aspects of a teacher education program as opposed to simply being included as an afterthought in a methods or foundations course. In a political environment that seems to be growing increasingly divisive and partisan, it is essential that teacher education programs better inform preservice teachers of the public perceptions of teaching in the United States and corresponding issues that are often viewed as controversial by those outside of the field. In this study, we offered an example of how educational documentaries can serve as cultural narratives from which to begin discussions of these issues. It is our responsibility, as teacher–educators, to find additional ways to incorporate aspects of extended professionalism into our courses; failure to do so will have negative ramifications for our students and the profession as a whole.

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