Dr. Jessica Riccio has always had an inquisitive disposition. When she was six years old she received a microscope for Christmas and experimented with anything and everything to create microscope slides. With a mother and grandmother both being nurses, respect for the sciences was ingrained in her. Similar to many other children, she enjoyed playing teacher but the love of anything related to science was strong. “I always loved to go to the library and to look in the 600 call numbers, the health books, anything that was related to the human body was interesting to me.” During high school, the interest in science intensified with new topics discussed and interesting activities performed, such as dissections. *Continued on page 2.*
Dr. Jessica Riccio – Continued

This new world of science motivated her to become a successful science student. Along with working hard to be awarded science related badges as a Girl Scout, any free time was devoted to helping people and further understanding health and science issues. During her senior year of high school, she had the opportunity to take a course called, The Human Condition that included one semester anatomy, one semester physiology and one of psychology. This is where she met the teacher, Ms. Paige, who inspired her to become a teacher. “Ms. Paige was the best science teacher ever: one part crazy, one part super affirmative, and one part content master. It wasn't until I sat in 414 here at TC that I realized she was the catalyst that made me want to teach science.”

At college, she majored in Biology and believed that she would go into the health sciences, possibly becoming a physical therapist or a nurse; however, she soon realized that she did not have the stomach for it. Attempting to find a solution, she pursued a Master’s degree in Applied Physiology at Teachers College. This was a connection between people and science content, but she wanted more. After getting married, she returned to TC two years later and began her Master’s degree towards secondary science education and met her mentor Dr. Keith Sheppard. When she met him, “everything he said made sense to me. Every experience I had before that point seemed that it was paving the road to me coming here and being in this program.” She had the opportunity to work with the Urban Science Education Center where she helped struggling teachers learn science content while she learned teaching skills. She graduated and decided to work in a New York City public school where she was really happy and realized that her students “were very capable but they did not have the traditional ways to show it.” Riccio took this as a challenge to unlock their capability. This guided her towards involving reading and writing in the science classroom. This adjustment in strategy created big changes in how the students could communicate their science knowledge. Riccio’s success with her students inspired her to come back to TC and continue her education as a fully-funded doctorate student. She wanted to find a way to conduct research in the classroom and “to tell the story about the students who were traditionally underrepresented, traditionally thought of as not capable science learners and scientists, and provide a way to be their voice to show how much they could learn.” During her doctoral studies she was offered an opportunity to work on a Carnegie grant where the focus was to work on content area literacy. “In that very moment it was like serendipity. Everything aligned and I realized that this is the name for what I was doing while I was teaching in the classroom.” The opportunity to be a research assistant on the grant guided her to the topic of her dissertation and to her early work as a faculty researcher.

For the past six years, she has been working with a special cohort of faculty as an interdisciplinary group – supported by a Provost grant – that focuses on reading and writing in the science and social studies fields at the high school and middle school levels in New York City. The group includes Dr. Delores Perin, from the reading specialist program, Dr. Margaret Crocco, from the social studies education, and Dr. Ann Rivet, from the Science Education Program. When speaking with Dr. Riccio, it is obvious how dedicated and supportive she is to her Teachers College students. “I love my job. I don’t know if I can say that enough. That's why every single day when I come to work I’m happy. I want to prepare them [her students] in the way that I was prepared by Dr. Sheppard.” Riccio keeps up-to-date with the current education standards in a unique way, “I need to know what's going on in schools to be able to help my students. One of the things that I do is to randomly take the state certification tests. It's my job to prepare my students in the best way and if there's some state requirement that I have no clue what it looks like, how can I help my students?” She continues to keep her toes in the NYC classroom by spending many Fridays working with cooperating teachers and TC alumni who ask for her assistance. “It makes me feel connected to high school students again. Even though I’m still in the classroom at TC, it's with adults. When teaching adolescents, you have to constantly be fresh and know the trends. You want to be able to relate to students. They give me so
Dr. Jessica Riccio – Continued

much excitement and information that when I come back and plan for my new teachers I always have ideas from the students in the high schools.”

Besides being the M.A. Pre-Service Coordinator, teaching her many courses and working on her own research, she also enjoys going to the aquarium, zoo, and beach with her husband and two young children. Looking around her office – scattered with seashells and beach decorations – it is noticeable how much she enjoys anything water-related. She recently visited Maine with her family and every spring break they travel to Florida to enjoy its beaches. Perhaps her ability to balance her family and professional life so well allows her the freedom to hone her talents and research in science education. From the relationship formed during the content literacy grant, Dr. Rivet, Dr. Riccio and Dr. Crocco have recently been presented with another grant that focuses on sustainability. Partnering with the University of Iowa and Teachers College they are going to work on developing curricula to help teachers understand how to teach sustainability in social studies and science classes with a global perspective. Dr. Riccio will also be speaking at the ASTE National/International Meeting in Minnesota this January. She will be presenting multiple talks with past graduate students. She believes that it is important to “include [her graduate] students in research and let them enjoy the professional rewards of presenting the research. Dr. Moore Mensah did that with me when I was working on my doctorate, so there is a circle of mentoring happening.”


Eileen Donoghue has had many roles in the Mathematics Education Program at Teachers College. She has been a student, faculty member, mentor, advisor and loyal friend to the Program. Her love of mathematics began at an early age and grew during her freshman year in high school when her mathematics teacher had studied with the School Mathematics Study Group (SMSG) and taught using that curriculum. This new way of learning mathematics agreed with Donoghue and pushed her to continue with mathematics when she entered college. But Eileen is an independent thinker. Witnessing her older sister’s experience as a mathematics major, Eileen wanted a different perspective to college than focusing solely on mathematics. She did not want to “just fall into” a mathematics major, but explore all of what college had to offer. As a college freshman, she elected to be an English major which allowed her to take a variety of courses. “That ended up being a good decision. I was in a special mathematics class for students who were not going to be mathematics majors. We had a very interesting professor who had a PhD in mathematics but was at that time getting another PhD in philosophy. So he had a much broader view about math and its role in intellectual history. That special course is what cemented the idea that I wanted to be a mathematics major.” From then on, she considered herself a mathematics major and has engrossed herself in mathematics ever since.

During her sophomore year of college, she realized that she wanted to be a mathematics teacher. This love of teaching started as a child when her older brothers and sister would go off to school, Eileen would make her own school in her mother’s pantry. Rather than completing an education minor,
Dr. Eileen Donoghue – Continued

she finished college with a minor in philosophy and took a number of courses in fine arts. After college, she enrolled in an intensified Master of Arts in Teaching program that included education courses and further study of mathematics at Northwestern University in Evanston. She began teaching during the program and continued after she graduated at a junior high school for one year, when she was offered the interesting opportunity to teach at a small independent prek-12 school. She ended up teaching there for about a dozen years and became the mathematics department chair and later the director of studies for the upper school. This position allowed her to work with other departments outside of mathematics – she enjoyed this freedom. During her time at this school, Eileen says she “was able to teach and develop unusual courses for the high school. In the early 1970s, we had a full-year course in probability and statistics and, later, semester-long courses in linear algebra and projective geometry. We had an interesting way of doing precalculus: we broke it into two half-year courses, one in analytic geometry and the other in elementary functions. We used college texts and for one year we actually used a text that Dr. Vogeli had written on elementary functions. Of course, I didn’t get to know Dr. Vogeli until some years later.”

During a sabbatical, she received a Klingenstein Fellowship from Teachers College. She took the year at Teachers College to reflect on her role at the independent school – she was being groomed for administration but her focus was always in the classroom. “I recognized through my experience at Teachers College the importance of teacher preparation and development. I had a very strong and rich experience in teaching at the school level, so I saw my next step as preparing teachers to do what I had done and what I enjoyed so much.” During the mid-1980s, Donoghue left her position at the independent school and returned to Teachers College to study full-time. Her dissertation topic grew naturally from her love of history of mathematics and Teachers College being the start of it all with David Eugene Smith. “[My dissertation topic] allowed me to use a lot of the knowledge that I had gained not in just math but in other areas. I was doing translations from French, doing historical research and, of course, I had to know mathematics and teaching as well. All of these things came together in a wonderful way, so for me my dissertation was not narrowing as it tends to be for many people – it was a broadening experience.” She has continued her research of David Eugene Smith and mathematics education history from then on which includes many publications.

After receiving her Ed.D., Dr. Vogeli asked Donoghue to stay on for two years as a post-doc to teach some courses. Following the post-doc her alma mater, St. Mary’s College at Notre Dame, asked her to teach in their mathematics department so she returned home. But yet again, Teachers College beckoned her to return to teach some summer courses which eventually grew to her being a fulltime professor in the department in 1992. She enjoyed working with the students at Teachers College and has fond memories of her colleagues. Donoghue now has a faculty position at the College of Staten Island and the Graduate Center, both City University of New York institutions. Her research continues to focus on history but also includes international education and gifted education.

She enjoys travelling and uses conferences as an opportunity to explore the world. Most recently, she went to the First International Conference on the History of Mathematics Education, which was held in Iceland. After the conference had ended, she stayed a few days longer to see the country on her own. Donoghue also travelled during her time at Teachers College to exotic places such as Katmandu, Nepal and Malawi through the Peace Corps workshops. She also enjoys reading, going to the Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera, Broadway and off-Broadway plays, and the many museums and galleries that New York City offers. She visits her brothers and sister in the Midwest often as well as her sister in the Baltimore area along with her many grandnieces and grandnephews. Dr. Donoghue has a tremendous amount of experience and insight into the mathematics education world, we, at Teachers College, were lucky to have her as a faculty member when she was here, and current students were privileged to hear her speak at a recent colloquium lecture this Fall.
Growing up in Boston, Peter Garrity never thought of himself as a good mathematics student. “In high school, I was the kind of person that memorized my way through math, never making any connections. I went to Stonehill College, and I was going to be an economics major but I’m not the kind of person that sits still easily, so when I saw the kind of books I had to read, I realized that it was not the thing for me.” During Garrity’s sophomore year, he spoke with his advisor who told him to go and sit in on a calculus class. “I loved it; it made so much sense to me. Not that I could really make big pictures, but it really did make sense to me. That drove the whole path for me to become a math major.” Dr. Garrity does not consider himself a professional mathematician; however, he enjoys the social aspects of working on mathematics with others. His social personality drew him into mathematics education. He focused on pure mathematics as an undergraduate and waited to take any education courses until he went to the State College at Boston to get his Master’s of Education degree in Mathematics Education. His first position as a new teacher was at a middle school. “I tell all my students right now to never deny the opportunity to teach in a middle school. Because if you teach in a middle school and you learn how to control a middle school classroom – you can teach anywhere.” After teaching for a few years at the high school level, Garrity realized that he wanted to learn more about education. He applied to the Mathematics Education Masters program at Teachers College and began what he thought would be a one year sabbatical from his teaching in Massachusetts. Once he started at TC, he received a fellowship and it made sense for him to continue on for his doctorate which he received in 1979. From then on, Dr. Garrity has never really left the Mathematics Program at Teachers College.

He stayed close especially during the 20 years of teaching at the Columbia Business School (CBS) where he started a special program called MathCamp (www.mathcamp.com). This intensive program was for MBA students who needed a stronger background in mathematics. “Coming out the subway one day in 1999, I was speaking with Tom Jennings [TC’s Registrar at the time] and all these students came up to me and said ‘Yo, Dr. G – great lesson yesterday!’ Tom responded, ‘What are you doing? What are you teaching those kids for? They don’t need you, we need you. We need somebody that makes math fun.’” Dr. Vogeli agreed with the idea of having Dr. Garrity come back to the Mathematics Program to develop an elementary mathematics teacher version of the CBS finance-focused MathCamp. From the popularity of MathCamp, he was asked to teach *Mathematics in the Elementary School* and *Mathematics Teaching and Learning*. All of Dr. Garrity’s courses and his many professional development seminars he offers to school districts are classroom focused. “[The courses and seminars] may have research in it, but its research applied to the classroom and delivered in a classroom setting so the teacher can identify with it. I believe classroom embedded professional development is the key to success to getting teachers to change how they do things. If nothing else, my MathCamp program has proven that.”

Music and running are both passions of Dr. Garrity. He used to be a marathon runner and has completed both the New York City Marathon and the Boston Marathon. Although, he does not run many marathons anymore, he still enjoys jogging when he has the time. His love of music is expressed when he plays guitar every Sunday for a children’s folk mass at his church. He met his wife, Delia, during a training session for a new mathematics curriculum when they realized they both shared an enthusiasm for running. Their oldest daughter, Maura, is a navigator on a missile cruiser in the Navy.
Dr. Peter Garrity – Continued

who is set to deploy for her second mission to the Middle East this November. Trish, their youngest daughter, is studying at Boston University as an international relations major with a focus on Africa. This past fall she was part of a group going to Uganda for two weeks. Dr. Garrity saw this as an opportunity to help students in Uganda and to have a great father-daughter bonding trip. “It was just great. The students in Uganda never had a math manipulative in their lives. These kids have no engagement at all. Teachers write on the board and the kids write it down and it repeats. I'm very hands-on. So I just had a ball. They wouldn't leave me alone. I found it so fulfilling, fulfilling to the point where I want to go back.” The students had no idea that mathematics could be taught the way Dr. Garrity allowed them to explore using Geoboards and base 10 blocks. It was as if “I had a little laboratory. I was Piaget. There I was and there are these kids and I can see them counting. They are having a counting experience. They are seeing why 12 is a 10 and a 2. As opposed to this thing that is a 1 and a 2.” Dr. Garrity’s experience in Uganda was a confirmation for him that he is doing the right thing in his mathematics education courses. “If you’re hungry the best math in the world doesn’t help you. But one thing that the humanitarian group does is feed these kids. The whole package is doing the right thing. I would like to continue doing the right thing educationally and to go back there, to participate and really help these kids grow.” It is evident that Dr. Garrity has a huge heart and continually gives all of his students at Teachers College invaluable tools and techniques to help them with their own teaching and development.

Current Student Spotlight: Kristine Rodriguez, Doctoral Student in CCTE Program

Kristine Rodriguez has always had a passion for reading and writing. As a young girl, Kristine “devoured books” and would spend weekends waking up early and reading in bed until the late afternoon. Her love of reading transitioned naturally into an interest in writing and for several years she collected pieces of her writing in a well worn, canvas covered, three-ring binder. During her junior year of high school, her English teacher, Ms. Fulchetti, encouraged Kristine to participate in a New York State Summer Young Writers contest. Kristine submitted several short stories from the collection in her binder and was selected to attend a writing seminar with ten other contest winners. During two weeks that summer, Kristine participated in workshops guided by professional writers and her confidence in writing grew. She began to look at her enjoyment in the craft of writing as more than just a pleasurable pastime. “It opened up my eyes that it was possible to be a writer and be a professional. It wasn't just a hobby and I realized that this is what I wanted to seriously pursue – if my teacher hadn’t given me that pamphlet and
Kristine Rodriguez – Continued

encouraged me to try, I’m not sure that I would have thought about writing in that way.” Kristine continued to receive awards for her writing; she was awarded the Andrew Carnegie Scholarship, a fully funded four-year scholarship at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). At CMU, she began to see the connections between communication and technology and sought out opportunities within her Professional and Creative Writing double major that would allow her to work closely with other departments, including the computer science, robotics, and engineering programs. She continued at CMU and obtained a Master of Arts in Professional Writing in 2005.

After graduate school, Kristine took a position as a professional writer for a financial technology company where, in addition to marketing writer responsibilities, she was asked to develop and run workshops within the company to help employees improve their writing skills. This experience sparked Kristine’s interest in education and she enrolled in a Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) program in Edinburgh, Scotland, where she gained both educational certification and practical classroom experience. “I started the program with the intention of going on to teach in a language school in Prague, but by the end of that course I realized I wasn’t going to teach abroad. I understood that there was a demand to teach English language learners in the United States and I wanted to move back.” Kristine returned to the US and began working in the Boston Public System (BPS) teaching ELL to first-year high school students. Numerous positive and negative experiences as a high school teacher in BPS impacted her decision to return to graduate school to study education. In explaining one frustrating memory, Kristine recalls, “the year I started, the computer room had been closed for the past two years because the technology teacher had left and the position was never filled. The computer room still had all of the computers inside but they were unplugged and the room was locked.” In witnessing what she felt was a shocking contrast between the communication skills being taught and technical skills needed for future success in an increasingly digital world, Kristine wanted to find a graduate program where she could explore the connections between communication and technology. The Communication, Computing and Technology in Education (CCTE) program at Teachers College was the perfect fit. “Thinking back to it now, I came into this program with a love for, but a very limited view of literacy. Through both course and project work, that idea has broadened drastically.”

Beginning her third year in the Ed.D program in Communication and Education, Kristine has been working closely with Professor Vasudevan as part of a research team on a project titled: “Re-Imagining Futures: Digital Arts and Literacy.” The project, offering arts-based and digital literacies workshops, is situated within an afterschool alternative to detention program for court-involved youth between the ages of 12 and 16. Last year, they challenged students to become proficient multimedia storytellers and encouraged them to create portraits of their lives and reflect upon their future goals. In addition to her graduate studies, for the past three summers Kristine has returned to Boston to teach an Introduction to College Writing course at Boston College in the College of Advancing Studies. “[At Boston College] the course focuses primarily on academic writing skills, but since being in the CCTE program I’ve worked to meaningfully incorporate communication technologies as well. Students are encouraged to create and maintain a course blog, use Google Docs for collaborations, and spend time engaged with a virtual theater. We stay focused on academic writing, but these new course elements also give students experience with writing for different audiences and at different levels of formality.” It is not surprising that Kristine has turned out to be such a mindful teacher; her father is a public school teacher who has taught in the same district since 1972. Many times growing up, she would visit her father’s class and thoroughly enjoyed observing her father interact with his students.

Kristine enjoys traveling and has been to many places in her young 28 years. This love of travel started in high school when she was part of a student exchange program where she traveled to Italy. During her time at CMU, Kristine took advantage of the study abroad programs and lived in Australia
Kristine Rodriguez – Continued

for six months. She has also spent weeks in Brazil visiting with her sister-in-law’s family and hopes to go back for the next World Cup. On one of her trips abroad, Kristine found love and has recently become engaged to her Scottish fiancé, whom she met while studying for her certification in Scotland. Through all of her experiences, both domestic and abroad, it seems that Kristine learns something new from each opportunity. She has grown beyond the scope of a professional writer and is on her way to being a wonderful professor and inspiration to her peers and students.

“Video Games: With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility”

Asi Burak, Co-president of Games for Change, presented his talk "Video Games: With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility” on October 25th. Burak, creator of the social issue game Peacemaker, shared his thoughts about how digital games can be used a tool to shape society for good. The presentation was sponsored by CCTE and MST and made available to the greater TC community through the efforts of Professor Joey Lee. Dr. Lee’s research considers how digital games can promote identity reflection and cultural understandings, and how game mechanics can lead to real-world action.

Accomplishments and Announcements

Nathan N. Alexander, a current PhD student in the Mathematics Education Program, was awarded a Dean’s Grant for Student Research. He will be conducting a pilot study which identifies cases of mathematics success among urban minority students within schools and during their time outside of school, such as in after-school programs, at home, or even with their peers. His research will focus on students' perceptions of mathematics, the contribution of peer and family networks to beliefs about mathematics, and student engagement in "mathematical spaces". The results of this pilot study will provide useful preliminary information for engaging and increasing the overall achievement of minority students in mathematics, as well as helping to inform his dissertation research focus.

The Alumni Wants and Needs Committee of the Alumni Council wants to know how best to re(connect) you with TC. Please share your feedback through the alumni survey online at http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/tcalumnisurvey2010 or contact the Office of Alumni Relations at tcalumni@tc.edu.
Professor Anderson is a PI on a recent NSF grant awarded to Teachers College in conjunction with the Earth Institute of Columbia University and collaborating institutions, including Barnard College, where Prof. Stephanie Pfirman is the PI, and the American Museum of Natural History. Dr. Joey Lee and Dr. Sandra Okita, faculty in CCTE, are also participants in this grant and will provide expertise on digital technologies, social networking, and use of game approaches as a way to motivate interest in the topics to be highlighted in the learning venues produced by the grant. This is a planning grant pursuant to a much larger grant award on climate change education, focusing on polar environments and the consequences globally for a sustainable environment. The grant “POLAR” will particularly examine the scientific and socioeconomic evidence for the consequences of major changes in climate in the Polar Regions due to global warming. This includes changes in terrestrial and aquatic environments as the soil permafrost melts, ocean ice sheets melt and contract, and local inhabitants, especially in the Arctic have to learn to adapt to a changing climatic world. The resulting changes in climate and ocean sea level will also be explored on a global scope and recommendations will be made for teacher education, undergraduate science education, and better public scientific literacy on one of the most controversial and possibly significant climate issues of modern society.

Gillian “Gus” Andrews’ show, The Media Show, was in the Media That Matters film festival in June and won an award for exemplary fair use. Furthermore, her research with Dr. Herve Varenne, professor in the Anthropology Department at Teachers College, received an academic research award from Google.

Congratulations to Howie Budin and the entire CCTE faculty for being named #1 in Online Graduate Education by GetEducation.com. The ranking of the Computing and Education degree was highlighted on Kiplinger’s website as well.

Dr. Guo-Li Chiou, a graduate of the Science Education program, was recently appointed as an assistant professor at the National Chiao Tung University Institute of Education’s Science Education Program.

Natasha Cooke-Nieves, a current graduate student in the Science Education program, was recently awarded a $25,000 Milken Educator Award. NYC School Chancellor Joel Klein and New York State Education Commissioner Dr. David Steiner presented the award to Ms. Cooke-Nieves on October, 6, 2010.
Accomplishments and Announcements – Continued

**John L. Fargo**, M.A. Teaching Physics Grade 7-12 graduate and current Ed.M. Science Education in Secondary School student, has received an Optimum Lightpath technology grant of $10,000 to support him in his teaching at Cresskill High School in Cresskill, N.J.

**Dr. Meghan Groome**, a graduate of the Science Education program, was recently appointed the K-12 Science Education Initiative Manager of the New York Academy of Science. She also participated in a panel discussion on Math, Science and the Future of Our Nation hosted by Time Warner Cable at NEST+m (New Explorations into Science, Technology and Math) that was held on Wednesday, Nov. 17, 2010 in New York.

**Jeff Sult**, Communication and Education EdM graduate from 2003, won an Emmy Award for his work on “MLB Tonight” on the Major League Baseball Network.

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**Journal of Mathematics Education at Teachers College Call For Papers**

The “theme” of the spring issue of the *Journal of Mathematics Education at Teachers College* will be “Mathematics Curriculum.” This “call for papers” is an invitation to mathematics education professionals, especially Teachers College students, alumni and friends, to submit articles of approximately 2000 - 2500 words describing research, experiments, projects, innovations or practices related to mathematics curriculum. Articles should be submitted to Ms. Krystle Hecker at hecker@tc.edu by January 1st, 2011. The spring issue’s guest editor, Dr. Nicholas Wasserman, will send contributed articles to editorial panels for “blind review.” Reviews will be completed by February 1st, 2011 and final drafts of selected papers are to be submitted by March 1st, 2011. Publication is expected in mid April, 2011.
Op-Ed: Stop Waiting for Superman - A Prescription to Fix Our Ailing Schools?

A Review of the Film “Waiting for ‘Superman’”

By Dino Sossi

“Look, I'm just a storyteller. When I make a film, I never want the film to become a vehicle of social propaganda.” – Norman Jewison

Educating children is emotionally taxing. Their natural curiosity, inherent playfulness and seemingly boundless joie de vivre create an insatiable demand for constant attention in its fullest and most detailed form. Keeping a single child happy and productive necessitates a complex, improvisational pas de deux. Teachers normally lead these interactions, making a series of adjustments subtly synchronized to the variations in attitude and demeanor of children often capricious in attention and temperamental in mood. Even the most masterful educators can quickly reach their limit in patience trying to tame a reluctant solitary learner. Multiply this number several fold to mimic the practicalities of the typical classroom environment makes the task incredibly difficult. Adding burdensome social, political and institutional impediments challenges teacher and student still further, making the ideal of a nurturing educational environment for all nearly impossible.

“Waiting for ‘Superman,’” a new film by Davis Guggenheim, the Academy Award-winning director of the environmental tour de force “An Inconvenient Truth,” acts as a welcoming guide to what has devolved into a bewildering educational labyrinth. It is clear from his career that Guggenheim is unafraid of tackling complicated systems that are deeply influenced by stubborn stakeholders with conflicting agendas as it teeters at the edge of disaster. But instead of building a moral argument for fighting global climate change, Guggenheim focuses on something equally important - chronicling the dire state of the American public education system.

Similar to the battle over climate change, education is an interdependent ecosystem with multiple players and territorial policy makers. The most damaging effects occur in closed-door meetings and the pen still remains mighty. As a result, its subject matter does not naturally lend itself to documentary filmmaking. Given the complexity of public education, with its byzantine layers of bureaucracy, Guggenheim wisely grounds his narrative by focusing on the personal toll it inflicts on five students – Anthony, Bianca, Daisy, Emily and Francisco. Each is a highly sympathetic child who does not deserve to suffer at the hands of an uncaring, monolithic, Leviathan-like system, their lives slowly crushed by its fumbling, ham-fisted grip.

Guggenheim is a master documentarian who incorporates a vast array of statistics, personalities and storylines with minimal costs to pace, intelligibility or emotional resonance. He cooks up a thick gumbo of hard facts and soft tugs at the heartstrings –the simple aspirations of these children are heart wrenching when juxtaposed against the seemingly unavoidable obstacles they face in a
system that should facilitate but instead tragically impedes. If you are banished to a failing school, alternatively called “academic sinkholes” or “drop-out factories,” your chances of graduating are incredibly small and future prospects correspondingly dwindle still further. The system is terribly convoluted. There are multiple levels of government, conflicting funding agendas, and inconsistent curricular standards. The challenges are seemingly endless, the bureaucracy stifling to creativity, initiative and efficacy, costs inevitably borne by young innocents who are ill-equipped to pay. Although he is not uniformly effective in communicating the problems plaguing the system, Guggenheim gives sufficient detail to convey its complexities but not too much to overwhelm. Many people have experienced these problems personally while in school, or heard them from others still buckling under the weight of the system, but are unsure of neither their provenance nor gravity.

You can argue with some of Guggenheim’s aesthetic choices like the veritable veneration of the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) and Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) schools respectively. This treatment presents several problems – their clear success does not represent the uneven performance of charters as a whole, their expensiveness may prohibit them from becoming replicable en masse, and children rejected by these schools are left to wither away in places they clearly wanted to flee. The quality education their guardians desperately crave puts the children’s uncertain futures in sharp relief, exacting psychic costs that are undoubtedly real but difficult to measure.

Also, there is at least a touch of irony when a film titled “Waiting for ‘Superman,’” which decries the impact of a solo hero who may never come, focuses on a couple of iconoclastic educational innovators - the irrepressible Geoffrey Canada, President and CEO of the HCZ as well as the steely-willed former Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools system, Michelle Rhee. Their heroic work caused tectonic shifts in their respective educational communities but may not represent the painful reality of most jurisdictions where massive reform is necessary. You can also question the value of what feels like an easy vilification of teachers unions, and more specifically, the American Federation of Teachers and its president Randi Weingarten. Her already difficult job, protecting the livelihood of teachers who have been historically underpaid and gratuitously exploited, probably became tougher because of this documentary.

But perhaps Guggenheim is selecting a few narrative pressure points to advocate on behalf of a larger, more profound theme. Public education can always use greater funding aimed at improving crucial student outcomes such as increased literacy and numeracy scores. It is somewhat disingenuous to disagree with this as a starting point. And perhaps crafting a story that champions some themes at the expense of arguably equally valid others is a compromise he felt necessary to make.

As a rhetorical device, Guggenheim appeals to the American ethos that helped fashion, for better and worse, the country we find ourselves in today. Perhaps advocating on behalf of the innovation promised by charters and against the inflexibility of unions is the shrewdest opening gambit. To create a narrative counterpoint against these young student protagonists, it appears that something needed to be demonized. And it is relatively easy to do this at the expense of the straw men of teachers unions and bloated faceless bureaucracies, though arguably unfair.

We speak about public policy within an increasingly polarized discursive space where areas of commonality are increasingly rare. An anemic economic recovery in the aftermath of a global recession has added heat to already incendiary and vitriolic public debate – more nuanced recommendations for the future be damned. Perhaps Guggenheim appeals for the innovation which has fueled the US economy
and rails against union-mandated collectivism that is antithetical to the rugged spirit of American individualism in the hopes of creating a point of convergence in an increasingly stratified political spectrum. For the sake of the prospective dropouts who will inevitably be left to recover from the social, psychological and financial scars inflicted by a broken education system, let’s hope that Guggenheim’s prescription is correct.

“Waiting for ‘Superman’” screened as part of the Constitution Day Celebrations and was hosted by the Teachers College Office for Diversity and Community Affairs. The faculty panel included remarks by Jeffrey Henig, Aaron Pallas, Michael Rebel, Erica Walker, Barbara Wallace and was moderated by Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz.

Please find more information about Dino Sossi, a current doctoral student in the CCTE Program, at http://www.dinosossi.com/.

Dino Sossi

Faculty, Adjunct, Student and Alumni Publications and Presentations

**Baird, J.** (2010). “Comic Projects in the Classroom: Using Interactive Sequential Art to Enhance Education.” Workshop and presentation given at the University of Texas Charter School 2nd Annual Teach and Share, Austin, TX.


Check out MST Times online for the interview video clips, active links, and article archives.

http://blogs.tc.columbia.edu/mst

Kenny Nienhusser, Director of Academic Administration for the Department of Mathematics, Science and Technology, created MST Times in Fall 2005.

Each year, the MST Department Graduate Assistant is responsible for writing and editing the newsletter. Below, editors and respective volume numbers are listed.

Volume I (2005-2006): Raven Hebert
Volume V (2009-2010): Amy J. Rae and Diane R. Murray
Volume VI (2010-2011): Diane R. Murray, drm2132@columbia.edu

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