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OprahPaganda?

By Anthony Cody on September 21, 2010 1:36 AM | 20 Comments | Recommend

From Wikipedia:

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Propaganda is a form of communication that is aimed at influencing the attitude of a community toward some cause or position.

As opposed to impartially providing information, propaganda, in its most basic sense, presents information primarily to influence an audience. Propaganda often presents facts selectively (thus possibly lying by omission) to encourage a particular synthesis, or uses loaded messages to produce an emotional rather than rational response to the information presented. The desired result is a change of the attitude toward the subject in the target audience to further a political agenda. Propaganda can be used as a form of political warfare.

I have not seen "Waiting for Superman," but in the one hour infomercial offered by Oprah yesterday, I got a pretty good taste, and I think I may avoid the heartburn it is likely to cause. Oprah's guests were Michelle Rhee, Bill Gates, and the movie's producer, Davis Guggenheim. Guggenheim described his motivation for making the film as being from the guilt he felt driving his children to their presumably elite private school, passing by neighborhood schools along the way. So he has made a film that characterizes all those schools as hopelessly broken, and offers charters as the main hope.

And why are these schools so hopeless? Because they have bad teachers that are impossible to fire, that's why. Michele Rhee describes teacher tenure as "a job for life." Oprah says "After two years you have a job for life and you can't be fired! Who does that?"

Davis Guggenheim, the movie's producer, intones "Everybody gets it. It's automatic. You show up for two years, you got tenure."

That is a flat-out lie. In my district, which is known for a strong union, teachers do not get tenure unless their principal wants them to. Many teachers are released at the end of their first or second year. Tenure is by no means automatic. And there are indeed ways to get rid of tenured teachers, who do not have "jobs for life," but rather have rights to due process. In fact, a few moments earlier, we were told "Michelle Rhee has fired a thousand teachers and principals," many of whom had tenure. We do need to improve our evaluation systems, and I have **written some suggestions here**. But this is a lie, and it should not have been presented without a challenge.

Oprah tries to reassure those of us who might be having a reaction to this.

Everybody knows I love good teachers, and there are so many thousands of you great ones in this country, so we're not talking about you, if you are a good teacher. Okay? So save your time gettin' upset. And what I know is that you who are the good and great teachers out there, you also want good and great teachers, because you really care about the kids.

Here is the problem, Oprah. We do not trust the ways that are being cooked up to sort the good teachers from the bad. Especially the methods that rely primarily on test scores, which is what Ms. Rhee relied on to make her determination. As Linda Darling Hammond **pointed out this week**,

Unfortunately, as useful as new value-added assessments are for large-scale research, studies repeatedly show that these measures are highly unstable for individual teachers. Among teachers who rank lowest in one year, fewer than a third remain at the bottom the next year, while just as many move to the top half.

It is not that we "good teachers" want to protect supposedly "bad teachers." It is that we fear a witchhunt based on test scores will have disastrous consequences for ourselves, our peers, and the students we care about.

How is it the most of the rich countries supposedly beating the pants off us academically also happen to have strong unions for teachers? And that the states within this country that perform worst are often those with the weakest unions? But according to Bill Gates, all we need to do to move to the head of the pack internationally is get rid of the bad teachers. Never mind the fact that we lead the world in children in poverty, with more than 23% of our students below the poverty level.

Then we meet Emily. Emily was the face of the child who would have been on the low track if she had stayed in her neighborhood public school. But Emily managed to escape her fate by going to Summit Prep Charter School.

Oprah asks, "If you had gone to your neighborhood high school, what would have happened?" Emily replies,

"The thing is, I'm very smart and intellectual, but I don't test well. If I had gone to my neighborhood school I would have been put in the low classes with the teachers who, you know, they have their tenure, so they're protected, but they're not really excited to teach you. I'd be with the kids who wouldn't be willing to learn. I feel like being in that environment I'd be on the road to failure, and it breaks my heart, and I'd hate to have to go to a school where everyone else wouldn't learn."

Oprah: "You articulated that so well!"

Oh dear.

Yes, students are tracked. But Emily has escaped to a track that is simply at a different site, and left behind her peers who are apparently unwilling to learn, and her teachers who have lost the will to teach them.

Charter schools are currently educating 3% of the nation's students, and unfortunately, the results we have seen thus far do not indicate they are doing significantly better than regular public schools, at least according to the test scores. (see a fuller discussion of charters **here**.)

If our schools are going to be improved, it is going to be through the work of people willing to invest in them, even in the ones with children who seem less willing to learn. We need the sort of resources that go into the schools to which Mr. Guggenheim sends his children. We need better evaluation practices NOT based on test scores, because then students like Emily, who doesn't test well, will not find herself to be the reason her teacher did not get a satisfactory evaluation.

This is the face of propaganda. Artfully presented to tug at our heartstrings, to manipulate our sympathies for these poor children, and arouse our anger towards those bad teachers and their unions that prevent them from being held accountable.

Unfortunately there is every indication that NBC's **Education Nation** intends to serve us up a heaping plateful of similarly one-sided pro-charter, pro-testing, anti-union propaganda. (their Facebook page has now apparently blocked me from leaving comments there, by the way.) I hope teachers make their presence known and share our belief in our schools, in our students and in our peers. There is late word that they have now invited recent national Teacher of the Year Anthony Mullen, who has some experience **speaking truth to power**. It should be an interesting event.

Oprah promises to have real teachers on her show this Friday, September 24. Will she include the voices of the many of us who question the agenda set by Rhee and Gates?

What do you think? Is this propaganda? How can we get our perspectives heard?

Categories: **education reform**
