Getting rid of bad teachers

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As a parent who sent my child to New York City public schools, as a former teacher myself, I've seen my share of bad teachers. Great, good, mediocre, and awful teachers exist in every school. The same range of job performance describes the lawyers, doctors, customer service representatives – you name it – I deal with on a daily basis.

So what explains this hysteria, and it is a hysteria, about bad teachers? To start, we have "macro" factors I describe on Democracy Now. But there's a viciousness to the attacks on teachers that can't be explained solely by economics. Gender is at work here too, a deep hostility to women and the nurturing typically associated with "women's work," which teaching is of course. (About 85% of all K-12 teachers are women.) Neoliberalism has no use for the life of the mind or nurturing because these activities do not produce profit, and in neoliberalism's ideological universe, nothing counts but profit and Darwinian competition.

This viciousness towards teachers is once again in the news, literally, in Los Angeles. The LA Times has created an online database of elementary school teachers, by name and published ratings for them based on their students' standardized test scores. To understand the utter ludicriousness of this new system used to rate teachers, called "value added," imagine if doctors were rated on their patients' health nine months after treatment began. The rating system had no controls for what patients did outside of the office, no controls for their health when they commenced treatment. Then newspapers published doctors' names and ratings? Teachers who are named can post responses. One I found especially moving was written by William Torres.

United Teachers of Los Angeles, the teachers union, has organized a demonstration, Sept.14, 4:30 – 6:00 p.m. at the LA Times Building in downtown LA. The union calls the LA Times action "teacher bashing." I think it's something more as well – getting back at mom.