Waiting for Superman? The title says it all

written by newpolitics | November 14, 2010

The critique of “Waiting for Superman,” available mostly in the blogosphere, indicates that a backlash against the neoliberal project in education is developing. No doubt you’ve seen the barrage of propaganda for this ersatz documentary, which touts charter schools as the solution to poverty and inequality and teachers unions as the enemy. But if you haven’t read the critiques by teachers and advocacy groups, be sure to look at the Rethinking Schools webpage that refutes the film’s premises and conclusions. The site contains Diane Ravitch’s refutation of the charter school mythology, published in the New York Review of Books. TMI? Fairtest has a neat summary of the film’s inaccuracies.

It’s disappointing that this newly galvanized opposition has missed the ways that gender should be considered. Much of the vitriol against teachers relates to the fact that teaching is women’s work. About 84% of all teachers K-12 are women. In “School work: Gender and the Cultural Construction of Teaching” Sari Biklen critiques the fact that superior teachers are often cast as heroes, like the Lone Ranger who rides into town and cleans up crime and mayhem. But in the real life of schools, teaching is best accomplished with the support and insights of others (often women) – parents, colleagues, students. Maybe even administrators. For instance, good teachers take ideas from others – and readily acknowledge they do so.

The movie and neoliberalism tweak the “heroic model” of teaching while pressing for it to be the only way to construct teachers’ work. For instance, the Lone Ranger had Tonto. Superman has Lois Lane. True, Tonto was subordinate but he was present, the helpful minority who could be a “cultural informant” if needed. But Tonto is gone, replaced by a white, female who hangs around but is never involved in the action, except to get in the way.

This is neoliberalism’s new construction of gender, one in which race has been erased as a consideration, one that is intensely individualistic and competitive. No where in this vast social engineering that is destroying public education is there acknowledgment of the need for collaboration among teachers or between parents and teachers. The nurturing traditionally associated with women’s paid labor outside the home (in careers like nursing and teaching) has been pushed out of schools. When test scores are all that counts, there’s no payoff to consider children’s psychological and social needs. But even Superman’s kids will need nurturing. After all, their dad is off saving the world and doesn’t have time to get refreshments for the bake sale or hear about the fight on the playground.