


# A Study of American Education Issues Reflected by the Movie “Waiting for Superman”

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines education issues in a documentary movie entitled “Waiting for Superman.” To do this research, the author applied the literary research method to find words, phrases, sentences, and scenes that explore the education problems in America. Meanwhile, the sociology of literature was employed to understand the social background and context of particular story. The research found four issues in the movie: public education spending, students’ literacy level, conflicting regulations, and teacher unions. This research has contributed to American Studies by understanding the fundamental problem of American people in education. It has also taught educational stakeholders how to maintain a high-quality learning activity.

**Keywords:** American Studies, Literacy, Public Education, Teacher Union

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## INTRODUCTION

The United States of America (USA) is a popular destination for foreign students from all over the world. Data for the 2019/2020 school year show that the number of international students in all grades has reached 1,075,496 students, or 4% of the entire American population. By this number, America has surpassed other developed countries. (*International Students & Graduates in the U.S.: 5 Things to Know*, 2021) This number is double that of American international students in 1980. Students come to this country for the advancements in technology and the educational system. Although, such dominance has been challenged by the progress made by China and India. Some colleges with the most prominent international student populations are New York University, the University of Southern California, Northeastern University, Columbia University, and the University of Illinois-Urbana.

The American education system offers various fields with representative educational facilities. There are many exciting schools, programs, and locations for prospective students from national and international to choose from. Meanwhile, the degree of formal education in America starts from Elementary School (Secondary and Primary Education). At this level, there are 12 levels consisting of elementary schools. Students attend this level at the age of 6 years. The next level is secondary school consisting of “middle school” and “high school,” which is taken for six years. After 12 years of education, American students can continue

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their education in Higher Education. (Study in the USA, 2021) As in other countries, at the last level, three levels can be achieved: Bachelor (Undergraduate), Master, and Doctoral.

Even if the United States has an advanced education system, this does not mean its implementation is free of problems and issues. Some educational issues that are prevalent in developing nations also exist inside the American school system. The widespread gap in reading and math skills among adolescents is a problem that is being considered. Many data reveal that two-thirds of American children are not capable of reading. (The Learning Network, 2019) Whereas the problem of low reading and numerical literacy is a problem that usually arises in underdeveloped countries.

Another problem American education faces is the budget of education funds to find and get new teachers. On the other side, the issue of teachers resigning the job prior to retirement has been on the rise due to the perception that the teaching profession is not financially rewarding. In addition, U.S. education faces a lack of parental involvement in their children's education. This issue increased the teachers' workload. (Boyer & Hamil, 2008)

This article reveals the problems of education in America revealed in "Waiting for Superman" movie by Davis Guggenheim and Lesley Chilcott. It is a movie that exposes the issues that present in the American education system, particularly in public schools. The film begins with Geoffrey Canada's experience as a teacher seeing the misery of children from poor communities searching for a school. The film demonstrates in great detail how terrible the quality of education is in the American education system. (Khadaroo, 2010) The management of American public schools, which were the only choice for five black moms seeking a school for their children, seemed unprofessional. In addition, the film includes interviews with educational figures, portraits of public schools, and data tables of American education.

### *Movie and Literature as a Text*

A movie is a work of art in an audio and visual platform. In more detail, a movie is understood as framed images then projected through a lens above the screen, so that the image looks moving or alive. According to Wahyudi (2017), The movie is a visual medium for the enjoyment of bright thoughts, ideas, and concepts. The story's inspiration may come from the author's imagination or from adaptations of numerous sources. Some adaptation movies, such as *Laskar Pelangi*, *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter*, are based on historical and fiction book sources, poetry, theatre, webtoons, songs, short tales, and comics.

On the other hand, the definition of literature, according to Wellek and Warren (1956), is a work derived from human imagination focusing on aspects of using language. Mursal Esten (2013) called literary works an expression of facts that are artistic and imaginative as a representation of human life and society. Meanwhile, Budi Darma (2019) emphasized that the scope of literature is entire creation; so, poetry, theatre, novels, and short stories are included if they involve the following characteristics: (a) a new world creation as opposed to mere imitation. (b) a spontaneous expression of the author's emotions. (c) the cohesiveness of its form and substance. (d) displaying various meaning's correlations

Based on the above explanation, it can be said that literature and movie are two different works. Nevertheless, both artworks have similarities. Ida Rochani (2011) asserted that films and literary works are texts that may be analyzed using the theory of literature. Due to the growth of technology, art medium is experiencing development. Therefore, numerous literary works, including novels, poetry, and theatre, are shifting their digital media. A film is a kind of digital media for literary works that previously only used printed writing and theater stages. Therefore, an adaptation movie can also be categorized as a literary work, however, scholars' opinions are different. Oppold (2013) says that through film, we not only read literary works in the physical form of books, but we read a joyful from a book in a different way.

## METHOD

The material object of this research is a movie directed by Davis Guggenheim entitled "Waiting for Superman." Meanwhile, the formal object is the issues of public education in the United States of America (USA), or the problems exposed in the movie's scenes. In addition to the film as main data, the author collected secondary data from literary studies of journals, mass media, and digital data from educational stakeholders in the United States. Next, the data are analyzed using descriptive-analytical methods. Sugiyono (2013) defined it as a method to describe or provide an overview of an object of study through data or samples that have been collected as it is, without analyzing to conclude the public. It means the research would expose the relationship between the object of material to the author. In other words, the research object is explored to convey in-depth data.

In other hand, sociology of literature was applied to understand the social context of the artwork. Sociology of Literature is an approach that examines literary works about social reality. The approach reveals the extent to which a literary work reflects reality. Reality means all reality outside of work as the reference of the work. (Nasution, 2016) Meanwhile, Sipayung (2016) explained that Sociology of Literary is a study that focuses on problems in human life. A literary work generally describes human efforts in fighting for the future, imagination, feelings, and institutions. Therefore, the sociology of literature focuses on the structure of society in particular work. Darma (2019) mentioned that the point of Sociology of Literature is a paradigm that literature reflects society. Therefore, the closer literature is to the reality of life, the higher the value of a literary work. This concept was in contrast to previous understanding when the aesthetic value of literature had not been determined by the ability to reflect on reality.

However, efforts in reconciling literary works and real life still require intermediaries, such as semiotic, hermeneutic, or institutional mediation. Mediation is a data analysis method used to understand literary texts' structures. (Faruk, 2010) It is essential to consider that literary texts are independent structures with relative authority.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study of "Waiting for Superman" is limited to analyzing the most crucial issues of public education reflected in the movie. The statements of figures, events, and scenarios that addressed education problems in America were analyzed. Among the numerous issues that have emerged, the following are the top educational problems in America:

### **Public education spending and quality outcome**

The issue of the constant increase in education spending reveals in three moments of the story. At minute 11:22, it was revealed that education spending had increased steadily from 1970 to 2007. The next moment also shows the American presidents' commitment to improving education quality through increasing public education spending. However, this increase has not been in line with the education quality improvement. It is narrated in 11:47, "So we have doubled what we spend on each child, but double money is worth it if we are producing better results. unfortunately, we are not".

Education spending refers to the budget of funds issued by public schools. It covers expenditure on schools, universities, and other public and private educational institutions. The fund includes teachers and education personnel salaries, supplies, building maintenance, and field trips. Spending is shown in USD per student and as a percentage of GDP. (OECD, 2022) In this regard, America is one of the countries with the most nominal education spending in the world.

The movie's social context is American society in 2010, which marked the end of the 2008-2010 economic recession. As a result of the 2008 recession, the labor market began to recover from its steepest dip since the Great Depression. The number of jobs in the United States has increased, the unemployment rate is down, and average incomes (after adjusting for inflation) have increased moderately. However, progress towards a full-fledged recovery

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of the employment market has been extremely sluggish. The most notable trend over the last year has been the expanding disparity between the employment prospects of Americans who have retained their jobs and those of their less fortunate friends who have been laid off. (Burtless, 2010) Economic recovery positively impacts the education budget in the education sector, which has begun to increase sharply. In fact, in 2010, education spending experienced the highest achievement in American history.

Currently, the percentage of the American Federal Government's Department of Education's government spending has reached 11%, or as high as \$33,180 per full-time student. Within two decades, the highest total education budget was recorded in 2010, which was \$192 billion or around Rp2,800 trillion. However, this amount continues to decline from year to year until 2020, only reaching \$72 billion. Although the total nominal expenditure on education is the largest in the world, it is still below UNESCO's standard of 15% in percentage terms. (Hanson, 2022)

Based on the percentage of the budget, this amount is not even the highest compared to other countries, such as Sierra Leona (34%), Singapore (29%), China (20%), and Indonesia (17%). (World Bank Group, 2021) This percentage shows the U.S.'s low commitment to improving the quality of public education, which continues to decline. So far, according to National Priority Project data, the most significant state budget allocations are the defense department (Pentagon) and the military, which account for almost half of the total budget. However, since the pandemic hit, the allocation has been reduced to the education sector, which ranks second.

The spending budget is a significant factor in improving the quality of education. Of course, with sufficient funds, an educational institution will be able to provide representative educational facilities, qualified teachers, and diverse learning activities. However, based on the facts presented in the film, we know there is a gap between increasing education spending and continuing decline in students' test scores. There is indeed a debate among education experts in America whether an increase in the education spending budget will determine the quality of education? The debate stems from a 1966 James Coleman's finding that displayed socioeconomic factors causing only a slight difference in student achievement. (Dynarski, 2017) The different conclusions led to a debate over the urgency of money in improving the quality of education. Nonetheless, all agree that education funding is not "of no meaning at all" to education.

The gap between the U.S.'s expanding education spending and declining student test scores (as displayed in the movie story) can be considered the American government's fault for spending available funds. It could happen because of too many restrictions on education funds for education providers. Therefore, education spending is not on target matching each school unit's needs. Another explanation would be misdeeds or corruption in the deliberate use of funds for the personal needs of educational institution administrators. Kirabo Jackson (2018) said some literature examining the relationship between education spending and its outputs suggested that education spending depends mainly on how it is spent, including its type and location.

Through this segment of the story, we see that the author has criticized the failure of the American government at the federal and state levels in arranging the allocation of education budgets accurately and on target. It also shows that the author is part of a group that argues that an improvement does not always follow an increase in education spending in education quality, which is characterized by an increase in the scores of test results.

Meanwhile, the story about education spending in America also appears in minute 24:55 as it reveals the high spending for every prisoner in jails. It stated that the total amount of this budget is higher than what America spends on national education. The film critiques that gap by calling prisons an expensive space. The narration says at 25:47, "The state spends \$33.000 a year on prisoners, which makes the total cost of average prison term \$132.000. The average private school costs \$8.300 a year, so for the same amount, we could have sent a

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prison inmate to a private school from kindergarten through 12th grade and still had over \$24,000 left for college".

This story is a critique of the way of the irony of the American government's impartiality towards the education sector. It is shown by the percentage of education budget allocations that are still below other sectors, such as defense and security, law enforcement, and the economy.

### **The U.S. Student Reading and Math Proficiency**

The problem of low reading and math proficiency scores was revealed in two momentums of the story. In the minute 17:00, the meeting of two political leaders, the conservative Republican and the Liberal Democratic party, is displayed. The figures claimed their commitment to addressing the acute problem. George W. Bush, on the conservative side, expressed the following statement. "And now it is up to you, the local citizens of our great land, to stand up and demand, no child, not one single child in America is left behind." The forum approved that America should be free from the problem of low reading and math proficiency. The state targeted 100% of Americans to pass literacy proficiency in reading and Mathematics. The narrative continues with criticism of the American government's program "No Child Left Behind" because not a single state has passed 100% math and reading proficiency, even the state of Washington DC only reaches 12%.

Reading, writing, and math are crucial components of the learning process. These three competencies are the essential basis of education. Without excellent talents and enthusiasm in reading, writing, and mathematics, a student who has trouble acquiring knowledge would be left behind. The decline of literacy rates is being brought to the attention of various countries due to the excessive use of information technology among children. (Rutzler, 2017) Therefore, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) regularly surveys the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). This agenda is an international assessment that measures the reading, mathematics, and science skills of 15-year-old students regularly every three years.

Based on data published by PISA in 2018, America's literacy ranking is troubling as a great and developed country. In reading literacy, America ranks 13th out of 77 OECD member countries with a 505 score. While in mathematics and science, the U.S. ranks 18th (502) and 37th (478). (Schleicher, 2019) Through this level, the U.S. literacy position is lower than other developed countries such as China, Singapore, Switzerland, Hong Kong, South Korea, Canada, and many other European countries. The results show that the massive cost of education spending acquired by the American government has not been in line with the improvement in the quality of student output. It can happen due to several factors, either in the management sector of educational institutions, the economic level of their people, and the negative impact of access to information technology.

Another fundamental problem related to the literacy rate among students in the U.S. has been the disparity in literacy levels between the poor and the have. It can be understood because people with high incomes can only access quality and expensive educational institutions. Meanwhile, the poor can only scramble for limited quotas from the quality and low-cost educational institutions. The phenomenon is reflected in reality portrayed by the film when the poor have to go through the lottery to get seats in relatively excellent schools.

The reading skill disparity between the poor and rich was revealed at the minute of 1:13:20. It was revealed that from 1998 to 2007, the reading proficiency gap continued to increase despite various efforts made by the government. The narration in the film states, "For decades, tests have shown an achievement gap between rich and poor children, and that over time, despite everything we have tried, nothing seems to make any better. Even progressive educators began to believe that gap could never be closed. Moreover, for those who drive by these schools, maybe we make the same dark assumption, that those kids in the poorest neighborhoods cannot learn".

**Conflicting state and Federal Education Policies**

Another crucial issue that has led to a further decline in the U.S. education quality is overlapping and conflicting education regulations. The complexity of the regulation is due to the lack of good coordination between education stakeholders at the federal and state levels. In the film's story, it is explained that the conflict between the regulations occurs in the mechanism of the competency test. The narrative states in minute 31:00, "Here is why: The federal government passes laws and sends money to the states, but the states fund schools, too, and set their own, often conflicting standards. Moreover, more than 14,000 autonomous school boards make the school government a tangled mess of conflicting regulations and agendas".

In America, education is a battleground of social and political forces. The fight for interests is common among stakeholders, including the federal government, states, educational institutions, teachers' associations, and parents. Even conflicts between the federal and state governments might happen, such as conflicting education policies. However, any conflict concerning public education is still under the control of constitutional rules and general procedures, so the conflict is often considered normal and safe.

Such organized conflicts do not necessarily imply a proper order and agreement since the distribution of welfare, income, opportunity, and power has remained unequal since the republic's foundation. For this reason, education in America is still more in favor of the wealthy groups with power and wealth, even though the system has mitigated injustices in other aspects. (Tyack & Hansot, 1981) In the end, the poor became victims of any educational conflict. Moreover, because of the differences in evaluation standards between the federal and state governments, learning evaluation cannot run optimally in assessing teaching output.

Policy conflicts between the federal and state administrations in developed nations are ironic. The inability to harmonize the exam standards depicted in the film indicates sectoral egoism that does not reflect professional accomplishment. The disagreement between California's federal and state governments about evaluating school performance is an actual instance of this policy conflict. The state government has been using the Academic Performance Index (API), while the federal government insists on Adequate Yearly Performance (AYP). Because both parties employ different methodologies or assessment systems, it is difficult for local governments to achieve their educational objectives. (Higham, 2012) Due to this disparity, local schools are forced to choose between focusing on API or AYP, as the two instruments are opposed. It is possible due to inharmony between federal and state officials, which prevents optimal implementation of the policies chosen.

**Teachers' Union and Tenure**

The problem of low teacher performance in public schools is revealed in several moments of the film's story. In the story, it is stated that one of the reasons was the existence of a teacher's tenure that undermined the authority to fire them for no apparent reason. Nevertheless, on the other hand, the policies that protect the teacher profession cause them not to show innovative, passionate, and professional work performance. Meanwhile, attempts to evaluate teachers' tenure rules led to conflicts between the government and teachers' unions. At minute 44:50, the narrator says, "Tenured teachers awaiting a disciplinary hearing on offenses ranging from excessive lateness to sexual abuse along with those accused of incompetence, are sent to the reassignment center, or the rest of the world calls the Rubber Room."

The protection act of workers has been applied in most countries. It intends to ensure that every worker would carry out their obligations without worrying about losing their rights. The defense is usually regulated by labor laws that legalize their rights and obligations before, during, and after employment. According to Rahayu (2015), this rule aims to empower workers optimally and humanely. Second, provide labor following the needs of

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national and regional development. Third, provide protection and realize welfare for workers. Fourth, improve the welfare of workers and their families.

A union or federation of workers was formed to strengthen workers' solidarity and protection. In the USA, teachers are assembled in several federations or unions, either at the federal or state level, such as the National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Independent Education Associations (IEAs), and Local Only Teacher Unions (LOTUs). (Kirkpatrick, 2022) These organizations have been heavily influential on American education through their authority to oversee the teachers' performance through licenses they provide and assist with the latest learning strategy innovations. On the other hand, the influence of teachers' federations is not only on the education sector; the organizations have also played political roles by interacting with political parties and governments.

The criticism against teacher federations was revealed in the movie when some teachers upheld irrelevant teacher tenure contracts. The film's authors projected that the tenure caused teachers' performance to decline due to the complicated procedures for principals and local education departments to evaluate. Many teachers take protection under their tenure contract by low work performance. In this context, the federations of teachers are fighting education reform efforts that will reevaluate the tenure system.

## CONCLUSIONS

The movie "Waiting for Superman" is a critical expression of the author representing the lower class of American society. Based on the story, the decline of American education is influenced by several factors, including misuse of education expenditures. It is due to the inaccurate rules of budget use. In addition, overlapping and conflicting education regulations make it difficult for education managers to set educational goals. The next factor that inhibits students' performance in acquiring new knowledge is their poor literacy level. Last but not least, the involvement of the teachers' federation and labor laws encourage certain teachers not to work optimally. This study contributed to American studies, particularly the education-related study of American society. However, there are still many intriguing topics in the field of education to examine from the American people's lives, as this sector has not been extensively explored by American studies scholars.

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