East versus West: The Dichotomy between Opposing Schools of Education

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The comparison between *Waiting for Superman* and *The Karate Kid* is a difficult one because their elements are fundamentally dissimilar. One depicts the decaying edifice of American education while the other chronicles the relationship between a kung fu master and his student. However, the philosophical underpinnings of Eastern versus Western schools of thought can be examined through the lens of educational theory as obverse sides of the same coin.

Stalwarts of American education might find *Waiting for Superman* mildly discomfiting in its unfavorable portrayal of the vast majority of American teachers as fat cats sitting on their inviolable tenures. Their jaded countenance and lack of enthusiasm for teaching reflect a general malaise in the U.S. public school system that has resulted from the inexorable rise of labor unions since the 1960s. Guaranteed paychecks and interminable job security have fed on the human tendency for indolence to create an army of derelicts caring little for their charges.

In stark contrast to the apathetic nature of American public school teachers, Mr Han of *The Karate Kid* serves almost as a father figure to the fatherless Dre who starts off as a refractory youth bent on disobeying his mother. Han’s stern demeanor revealing little tolerance for defiance is the *sine qua non* of Eastern relationships – the hierarchical structure of Confucian society. As portrayed in the movie, this element of respect is fundamental to any teacher-student relationship. Dissolution of the divide is as much responsible for the fragmentation of American schools as tenure; Eastern philosophy has never relinquished the demarcation between teacher and student.

The line between teacher and student does not preclude care and concern. These are mutually exclusive elements in a nurturing relationship. A teacher can exert firm discipline while demonstrating care. In fact, it is precisely because he cares that he does not spare the rod. Like his own child, a truly caring teacher would make the ultimate sacrifice in risking student hostility to improve his performance. Han’s unrelenting demands run contrary to the current of modern empathic demands but they derive their strength from student humility and an impregnable work ethic. Consequently, these principles find their way into the blossoming of Dre Parker and his development into a complete human being.

Thus, Eastern teaching philosophy is not simply confined to the boundaries of academic development; its ultimate fulfillment is the nurturing of human *character*. No doubt Dre and Han represent the ideal student-teacher archetype of one-on-one mentorship. In the ever-proliferating classroom sizes of *Waiting for Superman*, individualized attention is becoming an all-too-rare commodity. Faced with budget cuts and governments knee-deep in debt, public education in the United States is at the nadir of its once-lauded existence. Teachers reading newspapers during class, paychecks irrespective of performance, even toleration of sexual offenses – little wonder that students are fleeing in droves from the public school system.

The desperation of parents to extricate their children is so great that the charter school lottery reaches high drama in the movie. Pain and immeasurable disappointment await the kids who fail to escape their prison and must wait yet another year for their next opportunity. The agony is real, the consequences severe in *Waiting for Superman*. Every year in the public school system means real danger both physical and mental. What is common to both movies is the immeasurable love that parents have for their children and their consummate desire for their well-being. East or West, this spirit is what keeps the flame of hope alive for the future of public education. Parents will never stop trying until their kids get what they deserve.

But students also have to play their part. Dre Parker transformed into a determined, self-motivated student once Han’s care and sincerity became transparent. It is therefore imperative that teachers fit the mold inspired by the kung fu master – firm, yet caring. The concern for the student must be genuine; it is an inalienable condition for being a teacher. That concern is what impels students to perform and is the wellspring of *self*-motivation. Han succeeded where Dre’s own father failed because he demonstrated to the boy an interest in his future. If teachers hope to inspire change in their students, that power must first come from within.

The lesson of *The Karate Kid* is not simply the flowering of a relationship. Before success comes hours and hours of hard work – a principle long forgotten in the evolution of American schooling. As lessons move further and further towards student-centeredness and an inordinate emphasis on child happiness, the work ethic of *The Karate Kid* helps remind us of what it takes to achieve success. Notwithstanding the positive contributions of contemporary theory, there remains no short cuts to excellence. From Newton to Einstein, not one genius did not combine brilliance with peerless work ethic to achieve ultimate success. Child happiness is of paramount importance but happiness does not mean an absence of suffering.

That motivation extends both ways, the teacher for his part needing to derive a sense of duty to his student – the innate calling that should define the teaching profession. When that motivation finds impetus in *external* gain or reward, the denouement is ranks of feckless ne'er-do-wells leeching off the protection of the teacher unions. These unions, as portrayed in *Waiting for Superman*, constitute the largest donors to the Democratic Party who guarantee their survival in an ‘ant-aphid’ mutualistic relationship. Unions like the American Federation of Teachers originated with noble intentions but have grown so large over time that all semblance of balance has been lost. The power they wield virtually predicts a corps of dilatory teachers resting in eternal job security called tenure. With a situation this rancid, the only hope rests in the rise of charter schools who promise to operate outside the mandate of local governments.

However, the limited spaces available in such programs mean that many deserving students remain bystanders waiting for Superman. It is a grim outlook for American public education and one which doesn’t look to change anytime soon. Perhaps viewers of *The Karate Kid* can look to the East for inspiration in at least modifying their own outlook – focusing on things they *can* change such as personal discipline and work ethic. While there is little assurance of immediate reward, the hope of a better future might just be enough to keep oneself going.

References

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