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# Race to Nowhere?

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The stars aligned for first-time filmmaker Vicki Abeles when her documentary *Race to Nowhere* was shown to some audiences at the start of 2011, including a full auditorium at the public high school in our town. She couldn't have known that Amy Chua's Tiger Mother memoir would have sparked such a furious debate about the take-no-prisoners-style of parenting that demands children's achievement above all else. *Race to Nowhere*, which tries to challenge even the watered-down, Western version of "Chinese" mothering methods, has arrived at the perfect cultural moment.

Too bad Ms. Abeles misses the mark. Indeed, the holes in this earnest film uncover the very problem she's trying to address: a failure of critical thinking. Ms. Abeles is so determined to drive home her narrative, pushing our emotional buttons with a leaden hand, that we're tempted to discard our rational reservations along the way. So let's pause for a moment and examine the film's central arguments and methodology.

*Race to Nowhere* begins with the filmmaker discussing her own impoverished but emotionally rich childhood. Like all good parents, she wanted her own kids to have more opportunities and experiences than she, and so set them on the path to conventional success. We meet her three children -- an impish third-grader, quiet 8th grader, and seemingly camera-shy older teen -- and watch as they go through the predictable frustrations and challenges of modern over-scheduled kids: along with soccer practice and tutoring, there are breakdowns and headaches and much anxiety.

Abeles continues this general theme in short interviews with teenagers from a handful of public schools, who share their own tales of woe. Psychologists, child development experts, teachers and a college admissions officer reinforce what the kids are saying: there's too much pressure on children to perform, too much homework, too little free time, too little childhood. Even the children who stay on this grueling treadmill and come out "winners", by getting into elite universities, turn out to be disappointments: They often are burned out, devoid of curiosity, and unable to see any larger purpose to education besides regurgitating

what they've been force-fed in class. Even many top performers need remedial instruction as college freshmen, and when it's all done America turns out young adults who are generally unprepared for real work.

There's plenty to like in the film. Most importantly, it challenges the conventional wisdom about how upper middle class parents rear their children, at least with regard to school, sports, and extracurriculars. It also includes interviews with some compelling figures, including Madeline Levine, whose book *The Price of Privilege* takes a much sharper look at cultural morays; when she is on the screen, you sit up and take notice. Any parent who has ever waged war with a child over math facts, or spent another Sunday in the sticks for some mediocre soccer tournament, can sympathize with the desire to cut homework and simplify sports. Likewise with the drumbeat of "pressure" -- though it's not clear who is applying it -- on children to take on more extra-curricular activities. If you're a slacker parent, not monitoring your child's every breath or lobbying the school for tougher classes, Dr. Levine makes you feel vindicated.

But though her ambition is admirable -- this is her first film, after all -- Abeles takes on more than she can handle in 90 minutes. As a result, the film is guilty again of the very criticism she levels at our educational system: it's a mile wide and an inch deep. We learn, briefly, about the epidemic of cheating, kids' lack of preparedness for college, the relentless demands of homework, extracurricular insanity, the dangers of anorexia and cutting, and the short-sightedness of *No Child Left Behind*, which has condemned our children to pointless standardized testing and rampant "teaching to the test." Any one of these subjects, or even any four, would have been powerful had she drilled a little deeper. Instead, the film just skims across the surface.

The film is dedicated to a 13-year-old girl in Abeles' community who committed suicide, ostensibly because of a bad grade on a math test. It's a heartbreaking story, but you're left wondering what other factors conspired to make that young girl's life unbearable. Surely it was more complicated than a single disappointing grade, and you're left with a slightly queasy feeling that the story fits the filmmaker's narrative a little too conveniently. The same can be said of the lone college admissions officer who we hear advising a class of prospective students to strive for a grade point average of 4.0 or better. Later, she guiltily tells the camera that she regrets it. This seems tailor-made to whip up the very grade grubbiness Abeles condemns.

Flashing photos of famous college drop-outs as evidence that some successful people don't go to college is also tired and misleading. She implies that a college education is superfluous, and indeed it is if you have the horsepower of Bill Gates or the vision of Steve Jobs. Most of us mere mortals need to acquire an education somewhere, and every credible study on higher education makes clear that those with a college degree earn more

throughout their adult lives than those with just a high school diploma. Rarely is less of it a good thing.

For all its courage in tackling sacred suburban norms, the film fails to take on the elephant in the living room, the matter of class. For surely the problems she addresses are upper-middle-class ones. At the public high school in our town, 99.2 percent of students graduated in 2009--nearly identical to the graduation rate at Tamalpais High School in Mill Valley, California, where Abeles lives. But N.J.'s less well-to-do communities aren't quite so successful: public schools in Paterson had a graduation rate of 50 percent in 2010. Indeed, an abundance of evidence suggests that far too few kids in our country are striving for excellence, rather than too many: a recent report by the National Center for Education Statistics reveals that only 74.9 percent of 2004 high school freshmen graduated four years later. Among African Americans, the high school graduation rate was 61.5 percent, and for Hispanics 63.5.

Fans of last year's indie documentary, *Waiting for Superman*, might wonder what alternate universe the children in *Race to Nowhere* are occupying. In *Superman*, director Davis Guggenheim goes after the failure of standards, expectations, and opportunities in mainly poor, urban schools around the country. In these schools, there's no overabundance of AP offerings, homework-crazed teachers, or pushy parents demanding straight A's. Rather, children here fall into what Guggenheim calls failure factories -- schools with long histories of delinquency and illiteracy -- because there's no affordable private alternative and because some teachers and administrators are happy with the status quo. The often single and working class parents who want more for their kids apply to charter schools where the students are admitted by lottery, and precious few go home winners.

What would have helped *Race to Nowhere* is a closer look at the variations in value among college degree programs. Does a B.A. from Yale translate into greater success, over a lifetime, than a degree from Rutgers? How long does it take for work experience to trump the prestige of the college attended? The film pays lip service to the importance of students finding the right "fit" with a college, but doesn't explore it in any depth. And only interviewing students and professors at Stanford doesn't exactly help her case. Perhaps worried adults would fret less about APs and extracurriculars if we had better data or information about graduates' long-term outcomes from top-tier versus second- or third-tier schools. We also would have liked to hear more from the high school student who, describing the widespread use of amphetamines like Adderall as study aids, wryly notes how easy the drugs are to come by: "everyone these days has ADHD!" Now that's an interesting statement about our culture, but it gets just a minute or two here.

The film implies that we need a revolution in our society to redefine success, across the spectrum. Our children's well-being depends on it. Unless we eliminate homework, put the fun back in learning, reward teachers fully, consider the whole child, do away with grades, and sever the perceived link between success and materialism, this generation of anxious

children will grow up to be stressed-out adults with headaches, stomach distress and other anxiety disorders. Hello, but doesn't this describe, um...us? This is the world we live in. Maybe we should start by examining our own insecurities and regrets before setting out to change the system.

We have a simpler solution. To borrow from Nancy Reagan, just say no: no, you may not take five APs, no, you may not join four teams this season, no, you may not stay up until 2:00am doing homework, no, you may not volunteer three times a week at the Food Bank, no, you may not participate in activities simply to pad your resume. Whatever the consequences, you'll survive and we'll continue to love you. Saying no is a lot easier, and a lot more sensible, than waging the wrong revolution.

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