

Prison For Children: Education in "Un Monde"

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Article abstract

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Media Review

Prison for Children Education in Un Monde

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Introduction

Laura Wandel's *Un Monde*, a feature-length Belgian film released under the English title *Playground* (2021), begins and ends with a hug. In the first instance, Nora, a young child, wraps her arms around her older brother Abel, who reassures her as she weeps on the playground ahead of her first day of school.

"Don't worry. I'll see you at break time," Abel says. "You'll make lots of friends. It'll be all right. Don't worry. I swear, it'll all work out. See you at break time. I need to go, all right?"

A teacher intervenes and pulls Abel from Nora's tearful grip. "Off you go Abel, your class has already gone in," she says.

As Abel walks away, she tries to follow. Her father, standing nearby, moves in and gently clutches her from behind, stopping her forward motion. She grabs his hand tightly, resting her head in his arm as they move toward the school. A second teacher intervenes.

"Sir, Sir," he says. "Parents can no longer go inside with their children. Sorry."

Nora, still crying, looks petrified. Her father bends down to meet her at eye level. They briefly stare at each other. He wipes a tear from her eye. They hold each other closely.

"C'mon," says the first teacher, once, then again. She takes Nora's hand, ushering her forward. "It'll be all right, you'll see."

Nora doesn't believe her. She breaks free from the teacher's grip and runs back to her father, a last gasp of futility in a contest she's predetermined to lose. Soon she's being guided away by her teacher, body moving forward toward the school, face looking backward in the direction of her father as they head toward the chaotic hallway echoes looming inside.

Nora is right to be suspicious. By the time *Un Monde* closes she's desperately hanging onto Abel again. But now she's exasperated not panicked, and he's as much in need of her support as she is of his, both tenuously unified as a function of what they've endured in her short time at school: violent bullying, unfathomable humiliations, and deeply fractured relationships with each other and those around them. For Nora, the film's unceasing focal point, this moment of affection toward her brother is her latest and best effort at reaching him from amid the unforgiving backdrop of an institution incapable of recognizing their humanity as children.

Un Monde is striking in its penchant for placing Nora – a child entering her school for the first time – at its visual and emotional center and for keeping her there, unrelentingly, for its entirety. Virtually all the film's imagery positions Nora in the close foreground and sets her against a shallow depth of field that renders her surroundings perpetually blurred and muted. Viewers are forced to experience Nora's world – her school and its playground – as she would: adults are often only elbows and knees, older peers only come into focus when they enter her low-lying field of vision, and all perspectival inclusions and exclusions are carefully calibrated based on Nora's seeing and being seen. It's the same with *Un Monde*'s soundscape – what we hear mirrors what Nora does. No moment in the film is witnessed outside of Nora's perceptions. The effect is to bind us to the intimacy of her experience and not to let us leave it, a merciless exercise given what she comes up against.

In its mostly unanimous critical acclaim, *Un Monde* has been characterized as a meditation on the cruelties of childhood (Gilbey, 2022), a child's eye view of bullying (Bradshaw, 2022), and

a portrait of playground politics gone wrong (Chang, 2022). A more complicated reading of Nora's circumstance is possible, its traces recognizable to anyone who's ever known the inside of a school. In *Un Monde*, the workings and effects of modern schooling's "prison form" are on full display, and the relationships of those subjected to it are laid bare.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Michel Foucault sought to disentangle our understandings of the prison form as an exclusive instrument of the penal system. In it, he writes,

The prison form antedates its systematic use in the penal system. It had already been constituted outside the legal apparatus when, throughout the social body, procedures were being elaborated for distributing individuals, fixing them in space, classifying them, extracting from them the maximum in time and forces, training their bodies, coding their continuous behavior, maintaining them in perfect visibility, forming around them an apparatus of observation, registering and recording, constituting on them a body of knowledge that is accumulated and centralized. (p. 231)

In its focus on Nora and her school relationships, *Un Monde* puts the disciplinary determinations of the modern school's prison form on full display, revealing how the pathologies it encourages can shape children and the adults they become. We see, from the subject-position of a child, how any young person can come to be systematically severed from the relationships that matter most to them, stripped of their dignity, and rendered isolated as an unwitting prisoner of a school's normative values and functions. *Un Monde* innovates in prompting us to consider the deep consequences of those values and functions on a child's relationships of early school socialization.

Nora has three sets of consequential relationships worth paying closer attention to: the one she has with her older brother Abel, those with her peers, and those with the adults tasked with caring for her. Considering the ways in which each plays out from within the school's prison form in *Un Monde* can add to our critical vocabularies of public education, and offer insight into many of the masked principles – social division, secrecy, shame, dishonesty, distrust of authority, bystanderism, self-preservation – that can structure our relationships there.

Nora and Abel

Nora and her brother Abel enter school with a deep affection for one another. It's a circumstance that proves untenable. Care, presence, affection between siblings – their school's prison form puts these in peril. Its apparatuses for fixing Nora and Abel into space, for classifying and observing them, for compelling who they must become to survive there, instead brings to bear a series of antagonisms. Their mutual affection comes under assault. A more sinister set of relations to takes hold, and it spreads to their dealings with others.

In *Un Monde*, as in a preponderance of schools, the most valued expression of institutional citizenship comes through obedience (Raby, 2012). Does a student's body –

its appearance, its conduct, its presence – sustain institutional processes or contravene them? Does it move in proper sequence when commanded to do so? Is it adequately socialized to rise and fall at the sound of a bell or at the voice of authority? Does it learn to occupy sanctioned school spaces at authorized times and to vacate them just as easily, all the while accepting the consequences with docility

when it commits institutionally constructed contraventions? To the extent that human relationships – messy, improvisational, unpredictable – bump against a school’s functioning, those relationships are subject to discipline (Raby, 2012).

In such a circumstance, unscripted and unsanctioned relationships of care, compassion, and affection among students can come to be seen as institutionally subversive. Worse, the idea that attending to the immediacy of human relationships might supersede the training of bodies can come to be seen by students as antithetical to institutional survival, a disaffirming pursuit if conceived of at all. This opens a space for apathetic and antagonistic human relationships to flourish. After all, these relationships take shape against the backdrop of institutional machinations principally designed to support their own sustainabilities, in which bodies become props in this preservation exercise (Clarke, 2020). The result is a circumstance in which deep and complex affirmations of others’ humanity in schools is discouraged. In schools, expressions of interpersonal humanity are of course rife – but it’s worth considering the ways in which these happen in spite of rather than because of how schools function (Kress et al., 2022). In *Un Monde*, the school becomes a place that turns a once close brother and sister into enemies. This happens methodically, a byproduct of how schools work.

In Nora and Abel’s first encounter after their difficult earlier separation, we find Nora tenuously seated at a table in her school cafeteria. She sees her bother enter the large hall and leaves her table to approach his. A teacher intervenes.

“Where are you going?” she commands.

“To sit with my brother,” Nora responds.

“You can’t change seats during lunch. Sit back down, please.”

Nora pleads her case (“But I don’t know anybody”) yet is made to return to her seat without further explanation. A few moments later, believing she’s out of the teacher’s view, she pivots back and tries to reach Abel again. A second reprimand comes swiftly. The message is clear: any emotional comfort her brother might provide her is less important than adhering to the school’s seating plan.

Later, upon entering the schoolyard, she once more looks for Abel, spots him, and heads toward him. Again, her attempt is interrupted. Although this time, to her surprise, the disciplinary intervention comes from Abel himself, who we quickly understand has, along with the other children, internalized the school’s disciplinary schemes and given them their own expressions.

“Don’t come over here. We’re beating up new kids,” Abel says. “If you stay you’ll get beat up.”

He pleads with her to relocate to another area of the playground. But soon Nora, lingering, starts to get bullied, aggressively, for contravening the playground’s unwritten spatial hierarchies. Abel, who’d been part of the group bullying others, comes to her defense instead of standing with the bullies. His co-conspirators quickly turn on him. By choosing Nora over them, he too has now contravened the playground’s rules. Thus begins Abel’s descent.

Walking along the school’s stairway shortly thereafter, Nora witnesses a group of boys rough him up. At a subsequent outdoor recess, she watches, panicked, as bullies submerge his head, repeatedly, into a toilet bowl while a large crowd of students passively observes. Later, she

watches from the distance of her assigned lunchroom table as Abel, far away at his, and in increasing fear of the bullies, urinates on himself as they antagonize him.

In these and a series of other incidents – in a particularly harrowing sequence, they throw him into a large outdoor dumpster, close it shut, and leave him there as the school bell rings and everyone returns inside – Nora feels compelled to intervene, wants to intervene, but the school’s rules and norms preclude her from doing so. When she alerts her teacher that her brother is being picked on during the stairway episode, her teacher attempts briefly to intervene, but is interrupted by a second teacher who impatiently implores her to “move your pupils along.” Here the threat of stairway traffic takes precedence over the precipitating assault. Likewise, when she witnesses Abel’s head getting dunked into the toilet and runs to get help, the uncurious teacher who finally arrives to the scene’s aftermath, getting no clear answers from a tight-lipped Abel about what transpired (he tells her they had a water fight), simply says “you don’t play in the toilets... go back to the playground.”

Through it all the siblings begin to move apart, first slowly then acrimoniously. By the time of the garbage dumpster incident Nora simply watches and keeps quiet (although true to form, when her concern mounts a few minutes afterward and she attempts to reenter the schoolyard to rescue him from the dumpster, an unquestioning teacher physically blocks her path and tells her to return to class). In this and other instances, Nora’s silence isn’t neutral. Rather, she’s institutionally encouraged to perpetuate it. What’s more, even Abel’s stance toward his own victimization supports this view.

“Don’t tell anyone, that’d only make things worse,” Abel orders Nora when she wishes to tell their father about what’s happening to him.

All of this confuses, then eventually angers Nora. As she continues to try to help him his rhetoric toward her intensifies, so that, when she finally does confide in her father, her act is seen only as a betrayal (“if you stick your nose in again, you’re dead,” Abel finally says). And so, Nora starts to distance herself from her brother. She can’t understand his silence – can’t understand why he won’t defend himself, nor enlist the help of any adults. Compounding the issue is that as others start noticing his repeated victimization, she starts to suffer for her association to him (“What’s wrong with your brother,” “Your brother stinks of piss,” “I wouldn’t want a brother like that,” she’s alternatively told). Nora, disgruntled, eventually begins to lose her own newly made friends.

“He’s not my brother,” she finally announces to a group at her lunch table as her situation grows more desperate.

Un Monde’s chilling climax begins when Nora, now friendless, perceives one day that Abel has finally made a new one, Ismaël, while she sits alone. She confronts him angrily (“I’m all alone because of you” she yells) and they begin to fight. When Ismaël tries to break them up, Abel’s displaced anger turns toward him. He chokes Ismaël unceasingly before finally relenting and walking away in shame. Ismaël is left gasping for air. This incident precipitates a new cycle in which Ismaël now takes Abel’s place as a latest bullying victim as others eventually join in, Abel among them, in continually tormenting him. None of this sits well with Nora, but she retreats to silence again after confronting Abel (“You’d rather it be me getting beat up?” he offers). All of this builds to a brutal last playground scene, in which Abel, backed by his former tormentors, conspires to try to hold down Ismaël and suffocate him with plastic bag. Witnessing this, Nora intervenes.

As she wraps her arms around Abel and implores him to stop, their physical struggle turns into an exasperated hug as the scene and the film end.

Nora and Abel exemplify the tension between humanity and institutionalization in what could be any modern school. She's new to their shared institutional context. He isn't. Nora's learnt that when someone's hurt, the ethical human response is to try to help them; that when circumstances become too much to bear, you can reliably ask an adult for help; that when you need assistance, it's acceptable and worthwhile to lean on others, from whom you can usually expect good intentions. Abel knows better. Having learned to exist within his school's prison form, he knows that in such a context, survival entails something else entirely. Here teachers are not to be innocently trusted because one of their central tasks is to preserve the rules of the system that oppresses students. This, then, is a system premised on personal survival and achievement, one that values self-reliance and radical individualism, that values joining others only to the extent that it helps you protect and support your own interests (Giroux, 2022).

Un Monde makes the case that these are the implicit lessons all of us learn through early and continued socialization in modern schools. It signals to us that in many instances we learn these lessons so well that we pathologize the idea of contravening them. So that, for example, when Nora is crying on the playground and scared to enter school, we consider her well-adjusted to the extent that she takes the necessary steps to enter it well (by, say, separating easily from her father and brother). Or that when she temporarily learns to exist well in relation to the impositions of myriad school rules (I will say more about this later), her abilities to do so construct her within school logics as good, trouble free, able to get along with others, and perhaps even happy. And yet an alternative reading of Nora's schooling experiences is that she was right to clutch onto her brother without wanting to let go ahead of the first day of school, right to be scared about what lay ahead, right to fear rather than embrace the consequences of living a schooled life. For when viewed from a child's perspective, school can be a violent, aggressive, and tyrannical space.

Un Monde suggests that when you strip schools down to their operative structures, it's disciplinary aims are harsh and unforgiving. It suggests that the things we add to schools' base structures, even in their best iterations – good curriculum, effective pedagogy, well-meaning people – are properly seen as just those: add-ons that at best mask and at worst exemplify any public school's structural reason for being (Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2021). As institutions of social reproduction whose sustenances rely on obedience mattering more than humanity (Giroux, 2020), it is not a surprise that attendant cultures, relationships, and behaviors would form according to such a vision, and that two siblings with a deep affection for one another might lose the ability to express it.

Nora and Her Peers

Just as Nora's entry into school teaches her a series of new dynamics for how she is to relate to her brother, so too does it inform the ways she must learn to relate to her peers. Of course, it's true that any social context influences the relational dynamics within it, but what becomes interesting in *Un Monde* is how and why particular relationships take hold in schools. At school, Nora quickly learns a litany of socially valued rules governing peer conduct: to avoid showing weaknesses lest they be exploited, to protect yourself even at the expense of victimizing others, to work hard to blend into existing social dynamics even when they seem inhumane, that order comes before compassion in the eyes of authorities, that adults can't really help you, that snitching is

tantamount to betrayal, and that drawing the wrong kind of attention to yourself – or existing in proximity to anyone who does – is to be avoided at all costs. Being new, Nora resists many of these rules, even as doing so becomes overwhelming to her. Yet as we watch her in *Un Monde*, the film starts to paint a vivid picture for us about what can happen when said rules are contravened. It also gestures to the fact that things don't necessarily need to be so, that something different could flourish if not for the over-determinations of the prison form.

We see this most clearly in Nora's earliest days at school before Abel's troubles grow into a force that overwhelms her. Although not knowing anyone initially, Nora begins to make friends with two other girls. When they learn that she can't yet tie her shoes, they teach her how. When one starts crying, the other two rally to comfort her. In no time they're all holding hands together in the hallway, helping pack each other's gym bags, laughing together at lunch time, and playing together outside every day.

Yet trouble lurks in a social ecosystem with rules such as the ones listed earlier. As Abel continues to get bullied, Nora's association to him grows increasingly perilous. On the day the bullies dunk Abel's head repeatedly into the toilet, Nora becomes so focused on getting her brother help that her friends get annoyed when she abandons playing with them. After Abel urinates on himself in response to being taunted in the cafeteria, a teacher moves Abel to sit with Nora and her friends, thus violating her own lunchroom tranquility ("Something stinks... why are you sitting here," several students taunt). Soon others' judgements even turn to Nora and Abel's father, a constant presence at pickups and drop-offs, who we learn doesn't work ("Why does your daddy bring you to school? Doesn't he have a job?"). As a consequence, Nora eventually becomes ostracized too. Her frustrations culminate when a birthday party invitation she expected to receive is revoked, surely having to do with her brother, in response to which she angrily tries to seize the elusive invitations and ends up ripping them to threads as others watch in astonishment.

Who exactly it is that contravenes a school's presumptions of being ethical in this and earlier incidents, *Un Monde* seems to ask? Is it the bullies and aggressors who confidently exist within the school? Or is it those they bully, who transgress by not fitting in as well as others, thus revealing a school's dysfunction? Is it the bystanders who watch neutrally as moving targets are victimized? Or is it the students who are victimized, who make their untenable experiences seen, thus exposing the lie of what a school – its leaders, administrators, advocates – tells itself about how and why it exists? *Un Monde* inverts what we might too easily take for granted to be ethically desirous in considering socially valued school behavior. It suggests that behaving in ways we may think of as unethical are not necessarily a worse affront than behaving justly according to dominant school logics, so long as behaving unethically doesn't force a reckoning with the fact that how a school operates doesn't work for everyone. Dangerous questions about the meanings and purpose of schools lurk on the other side of this reckoning, lurk about the prison form whose processes and values sustain schools.

All of this is laid bare in *Un Monde*. Abel is a strain on his school precisely because he finds himself a victim among his peers and so in need of several supports and interventions. In fact, he is much more of a strain on his school in the role of a victim who stands out in needing immediate attention and accommodations than as a perpetrator who fits in among others and needs none. As a bully, Abel is left alone by everyone but Nora. As a victim, he's pathologized at school for not being able to fit in. Nora, too, exists most problematically for others within her school space to the extent that she stands out for reasons of her victimization, much more so than as someone

who falls in line with others who behave meanly toward her brother. As a result, when she attempts to act in a way that feels most ethical – when she makes requests of teachers to help Abel, pressures him to ask for help, notifies her father of what’s going on – she’s much more problematic and resource depleting to her school than someone who does none of these things, because she stands outside of her school’s and any modern schools’ normative functions in doing so (Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2022).

In *Un Monde*, there is therefore a way of perceiving school bullies and their bystanders as exactly the actors that school structures demand and value, even if unarticulated and unperceived in official discourse. For even if not outwardly obedient to their teachers, bullies are acting in accordance with the deeper discipline mechanism at work in schools, the prison form that most highly values acting in accordance with properly “distributing individuals,” “fixing them in space,” “classifying them” and more (Foucault, 1975, 231). According to this form –authoritarian, fascist (Giroux, 2022) – the bullies who aggress are doing the school’s work. On the contrary the victims, those who can’t easily be classified, those who struggle to exist within a school’s normative procedures, are not.

Such is the insight that *Un Monde* dramatizes. In *Nora*, it offers us an articulated picture of someone who doesn’t yet understand the system she exists within and exhibits more humanity than others because of it. Abel, who knows the system much better, exhibits much less humanity for the same reason. So too, do many of their antagonizing peers. Taken together, *Un Monde* exemplifies how the tension of acting ethically and humanely comes into conflict with a social system that isn’t constructed to fully honor these principles. Soberingly, we are made to understand that *Nora* will have to adapt a new outlook – less ethical, less human – to fit-in well within her new context.

Nora, Her Father, and Her Teachers

Two sets of adults are tasked to provide care for *Nora*: her father, who we only ever see on school grounds, mostly at drop-off and pick-up times, and her teachers, many of whom exist as barely seen voices framing her school experiences. Both sides are differently situated in relation to the school – *Nora*’s father grows increasingly desperate as he realizes himself to be shut out from the school’s handling of his children, while her teachers are mostly ineffectual insiders – but both likewise take on similar vacancies in relation to the supports they might have been counted on to provide. Through depictions of each, *Un Monde* offers us a still deeper glimpse into the consequences for young people of how a school’s prison form helps structure the relationships made within in.

With respect to *Nora*’s father, nowhere is this better exemplified than in a scene roughly halfway through the film, in which he makes a worried appearance at the school’s playground to try to monitor his children. In a sequence that binds the prison form’s literal and figurative presumptions, we see *Nora*’s father, now fully aware of how badly things have gotten for Abel, clutching the iron wrought vertical bars that fence in the school, trying desperately to peer behind them in a classic prisoner’s pose. This causes some chatter among *Nora*’s peers (“Your dad is by the fence. He’s not supposed to be...”), and much embarrassment for *Nora*, who he solicits to spy on Abel with an increasingly uncomfortable and desperate set of commands (“Tell me about Abel... *Nora*, I’m trusting you.... Are you listening?”)

Nora’s father is locked out of the school and wishes not to be. *Nora*’s locked in and wishes for the same. And yet this is a circumstance that we’re made to understand each must consent to

as a function of the school's prison form – here the school symbolizes the limits of a parent's ability to care for their child, a place from which they are physically disinvented during designated hours, no matter their child's circumstance (Saul, 2021). In another instance, Nora's father tracks down Abel's bullies at the school's morning drop-off, warning them to stay away from his son. True to form, he's interrupted by teachers who again side with procedure – it's time for the boys to line up for school and he's not supposed to be where he is. Nothing about the school's policies in this case are unusual. The teachers in question have behaved ethically by the standards of their contextual rules. Their responses to Nora's father are as such unexceptional and normal. Yet is this way of doing things the most elevated response to the situation of a struggling student? Under what circumstances would we deem it at all acceptable and normal to impose such separations on people – let alone on a parent and their children – who may not desire them? Here again, the prison form thrives.

So, too, is this thriving elevated among the preponderance of teachers at Nora's school, who are time and again shown to be disciplined by the same exacting structures as are students (with the added nuance that they are perhaps doubly disciplined by these structures - not only are they subject to them, but they are tasked with enforcing them). This is well exemplified in a disciplinary hearing the school finally calls after Abel is found in the school dumpster. Seen and heard, as always, only through Nora's perceptions, all actors (Nora, Abel, their father, their aggressors and their parents, school administrators) come together in what we can assume is a school leader's office. After some tense exchanges and forced apologies, an administrator intervenes and says, "I'm sure that the four of you are able to get along now, alright?.... Now I'd like each of you to shake [Abel's] hand."

With that, the school's intervention into what had been a series of aggressive assaults toward Abel – and into continued assaults in which Abel will newly participate – begins and ends. The message is clear. For the representatives of the school, the unambiguous source of the problem was that its student – Abel, in the role of victim – hadn't adequately survived according to its rules and procedures. Never was there any sense that its procedures might be amenable to examination and critique.

There is an exception to the ineffectual adults who surround Nora: her teacher, Madame Agnès, is an adult who listens, who recognizes the children's humanity when others don't, and who is as a result seen by Nora in ways she doesn't see others (quite literally in a filmic sense – Madame Agnès is framed with a specificity and clarity no other teacher is afforded). After the dumpster bin incident in question, when Nora breaks down ("I saw everything and I said nothing," she confides), Madame Agnès provides a consoling ear. Still, even here, there's a way to read Madame Agnès as a representation of the ethical limitations of the school's system. For one, through her existence in the narrative we are made to understand that even a compassionate teacher can be swallowed up by a school's procedural allegiances, a small band-aid placed over a large wound. More so, she too at times comes to exemplify the modern schooling ethos despite her best intentions. For example, in the same dumpster conversation, Madame Agnès sympathizes, "Your brother needed help. You did a good thing by telling us, I think."

To which Nora, now wiser about the school's functions, replies: "No, when you help people, things get worse." (In the same conversation Madame Agnès, perhaps not yet understanding the gravity of the situation, or perhaps unconsciously well-disciplined by the normalcies of the prison form in her own right, consoles by awkwardly suggesting that, "It's

normal to fight at their age. There's no need to worry.”). Later, following the disciplinary hearing in which Abel and his bullies are forced to reconcile, she again tries to console Nora, telling her that, “If we could have stopped this from happening, we would've...[but] sometimes we don't know what to do.”

Yet we might ask: why don't they know what to do? Why is the possibility of an intervention that perplexing? Is the circumstance that leads to unethical school relations an impossible puzzle that precludes intervention, or rather does a school's allegiances to its normalizing procedures socialize its actors to lose sight of what matters most, the well-being of the humans subjected to its procedures (especially the most vulnerable among them)?

Not inconsequentially, just before the end of the film, Madame Agnès tells her class that she's leaving the school to seek a position at another one. Nora doesn't take this well. She begins to give her new teacher a hard time. But the circumstance of Madame Agnès's departure gives further pause – for even in this one school relationship that Nora finds redeeming, we are met with the stark realization that the relationship was always in part transactional. Caring for Nora was a job requirement for Madame Agnès, her employment was what compelled her presence in Nora's life. Absent said employment her presence dissipates. And so, as is the case with her students, Madame Agnès's expressions of humanity are likewise informed by her school's institutional dictates. In which case it should perhaps not come as a surprise that she's ineffective in helping Nora – they are part of the same structure and have in common that they are subjected to its workings.

Conclusion

Released in 2021, it is worth pointing out that *Un Monde* appears at what continues to be an interesting moment of contemplation – among educators and the public – about how schools operate (Brooks, 2023). Even if not created as a commentary on pandemic era discourses of education, in which widespread school interruptions prompted ongoing discussions about the way schools do things – not to mention about the very meanings and purposes of public education (New York Times, 2022) – the film in the end provides a worthwhile rejoinder about what these discussions at times take for granted. This is to say that to pay attention to public discourses of schooling in this post-Covid context of educational instability and political wrangling, is to encounter a series of significant challenges the pandemic is said to have wrought for students, teachers, and school leaders: teacher shortages and burnout, a rising student mental health crisis, unrecovered student apathy and absenteeism prompted by pandemic over-reliance on online learning, exacerbated inequities among students and families that has further dispossessed those most in need, and much more (Edsall, 2022). Yet it is likewise to encounter a series of suggested remedies – in media, in policy, in research – too often unified in one way or another around the notion of finding ways to return to the pre-pandemic stability of what was (Kane & Reardon, 2023). In this respect *Un Monde's* depiction of Nora's destructive schooling experiences and its consequences on her various relationships leaves us with one last lingering intervention. It compels us to question the very notions and practices of schooling that so many seem resolved to return to.

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