“SPELLBOUND” This is the 2002 Oscar-nominated documentary rather than the 1945 Hitchcock thriller with the same title [which is also very good but less related to relevant themes] This is a very gentle film but also has some elements that make one wonder. It was very popular when it came out and, at one time, was the film in New York City earning the most money. One theory was that young people—with ages close to those of the children in the film—were taking their families to see the movie multiple times.

On the surface, this is a film about the challenges facing eight young people who qualified for the National Spelling Bee in Washington, DC. However, it subtly introduces a number of elements that connect to issues relevant to the social sciences: things [not surprisingly] like immigration and ethnic stereotyping, positive as well as negative; the work ethic and competition; social class, family expectations and support systems; the status in school of those who do not fit a standard mold; the relation of different kinds of learning to social mobility; the role of teachers; and the like. While one may admire a certain skill, one might also wonder why some people consider Skill A to be more important or more rational than Skill B. It may seem strange to devote so many hours to spelling words but is it any stranger than devoting a great many hours to anything that does not appear particularly enjoyable or future-income-related?