

Problems of education in savage inequalities: children in america's schools

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Twenty eight years ago, Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities: Children In America's Schools* exposed educational disparities between schools. This book mentions the failures of public education, which he argues are the warnings of the broader case of urban degradation. The main argument of the book is that a tremendous divide that exists between the rich and poor in education is a divide intensified by ethnic and racial prejudice. Throughout this book Kozol has two main goals. One is to show education "reformers" that their expression of excellence and choice shows very little concern for educational equality and opportunity, his second goal is to present the spirit and aspirations of urban school children through their own words. Kozol describes the landscape of his journey into the nation's poorest urban schools. "The focus of this book is on the inner-city school; inevitably, therefore, I am describing classrooms in which almost all the children are black or Latino. But there are also poor and mainly white suburban districts and, of course, some desperately poor and very isolated rural districts" (p. 74).

A central theme in *Savage Inequalities* is definitely the quality of education. According to Kozol, the quality of education varies, and explains why some regions in the U. S. perform better than others. He also notes that there are schools that lack basic equipment, educational materials, and proper playgrounds. All of these issues affect the performance of students and eventually their future. Another important theme in this book is economic inequality. He talks about how schools in low class districts offer low quality education due to lack of investment. Along with economic inequality racism and racial segregation are tied together. Institutional racism is public policies

and social arrangements that appear to be neutral and fair on the surface but have a discriminatory result, outcome. Kozol finds evidence of this racism in many urban schools which receive low funding per student and lack the proper resources to provide a well-rounded education to the students.

Another form of racism that he mentions in the book is environmental racism which is a variation of institutional racism. In some urban schools and communities mentioned in the book, health hazards exist in different ways. For example, some communities don't have easy access to trash, supermarkets, or even parks. He mentions in the book how " East St. Louis has some of the sickest children in America" due to the " sewage running in the streets, air that has been fouled by local plants, the high lead levels noted in the soil, poverty, lack of education, crime, dilapidated housing, insufficient health care, and unemployment" (p. 20). All of these issues affect the performance of the students that barely have the chance to go to school.

As a result of being surrounded by death, decay, crime, and unsupportive people, students in inner-city schools tend to become hopeless which results in a high drop-out rate. Kozol interviews many students in inner-city schools who gave him their opinion on the quality of their education and what had happened classmates. A student named " Rosie speaks of sixth grade classmate who had babies and left school." A boy named " Victor speaks of boys who left school during eighth grade" (p. 106) no one really knows where they ended up.

Kozol's descriptions within the book go beyond comparisons of school facilities, educational programs, textbooks, lab equipment, gymnasium space, and extracurricular activities, to include the rawness of general environment in which urban poor school children live. "The ugliness of racial segregation adds its special injuries as well. It ... renders life within these urban schools not merely grim but also desperate and often pathological" (p. 74). One thing that I really liked about this book was that this book does not try to answer the difficult question of what is adequate funding for quality education. I like that it highlights the disparities in education that flow from district-based property tax financing coupled with state schemes that require a minimally adequate education.

I found it very interesting how Kozol's comparisons of the resources available in wealthy and poor districts challenges the motives of the critics who believe that increasing school funding will make little difference to the educational performance of poor, inner-city children. For example, when he is talking about the financial needs of south Chicago schools, former Education Secretary William Bennet stated: "If the citizens of Chicago [want to] put more money in, they are free to do so. But you will not buy your way to better performance" (p. 78). It is important to see that all they look at is what money buys to understand the absurdity of the criticism. As a result of the inadequate funding, students are not simply being denied basic educational needs, but their future is also deeply affected due to the lack of funding. There is severe overcrowding in most schools, along with teacher salaries that are too low to attract good teachers.

Obviously, exposure to enriched curriculum offers more opportunity for children to succeed educationally and to compete in society. However, Kozol never passes this logic or suggests that a child who attends a public school in a poor area can overcome the barriers created by the lack of resources. Instead he dismisses the few efforts of principals, teachers, parents, or students that have successful outcomes. I'm not saying that extraordinary efforts should not be required in order for students to succeed in this educational system; but to ignore those efforts reduces the value of Kozol's study of systematic disparities in educational resources.

When it comes to Kozol's proposed solution of equal funding goes, it is not only absurd and unworkable, but also near impossible. Because school funding relies mostly on property taxes, those in charge won't have it any other way. There was a time when education used to be a priority in Michigan, but unfortunately that is not the case anymore. It is almost as if the policy makers are more focused on funding for the military, prisons and supporting large corporations. Education became one of the less priorities because, if it was a priority, all schools in the U. S. would have equal funding and not one school would have to end up like the urban schools described by Kozol and those still exist today.

The writing style of the book is effective and not in any way manipulative. Kozol does a great job of sectioning the book based on the location he was visiting. Kozol describes the conditions of the urban schools and simply compares them to the suburban schools. The way he writes his opinions allows us to imagine the poor conditions that the urban schools had to

endure, and allowed us to see the perfect conditions that were found in the suburban schools. I don't believe he wrote this book as a way to manipulate but rather to educate the public on the inequality of school funding. He points out the differences between schools as a way to expose what is really going on with school financing. I believe he is simply describing the reality of public schools in America and it is the reader's choice to decide what to believe from this information.

My pre-college education does not resemble Kozol's inner city or suburban models of schooling, in a way it is right in the middle. I went to a charter school, Cesar Chavez Academy, located in Southwest Detroit. My school had classrooms, bathrooms, gymnasium, AP classes, diversity and technology resources. The only thing it didn't have was an auditorium or a lab. Most of the students were Hispanic and very little Caucasians. I believe that was the case because of its location, mostly Hispanic lived around that area.

The proposal I would recommend to rectify the Savage Inequalities in public schools that Kozol describes is funding schools equally, and or at the very least provide them extra funding. I believe that if schools are funded equally or provided with extra funding based on their needs, then the inequality of school finance would not exist. A good proposal would be to offer busing to those who live in an urban area that way they have the opportunity to attend a suburban school. I think if the government is not going to fund schools that are in serious need of money, then families should be provided with more opportunities in order to help their family.

The result that Kozol illustrates, is a step to the system of education that prepares more affluent students for economic opportunity, while others sink in the cycles of poverty and despair. Although the book was first published in 1991, the issues he raised continue to affect American schools today. It will continue to raise issues until we do something to put an end to this divide. All of these problems and concern lead to inner-city children's low levels of academic performance, high dropout rates, classroom discipline problems, and low levels of college attendance. To Kozol, the nationwide problem of high school dropouts is a result of society and this unequal educational system, not the lack of individual motivation. Kozol's solution to the problem, is to simply spend more tax money on poor school children and in the inner-city school districts in order to equalize spending between school districts.

While it does not take away from the book's overall value, Kozol's descriptive approach to the problems of poor schools conveys a sense of hopelessness that is aggravated by the lack of proposed solutions. *Savage Inequalities* does a great job of portraying Kozol's vision of urban decay and moral shame of innocent school children. It is not a dependable text on either educational theory or legal strategies to address the disparities caused by unjust school financing systems. This book provides a context for understanding why education advocacy must be included in the priorities of issues of concern to the legal services community.