

Kozol's savage inequalities



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Jonathan Kozol was born in 1936 in Massachusetts. Throughout his life, he has been extremely active in public issues. He spent several years teaching in public schools, fighting against the inequalities there, but also fighting for the civil rights movement and equality for all, despite race or ethnicity. Most of the schools Kozol taught at were inner-city schools, similar to the ones he writes about in his book (www.wikipedia.com).

Kozol's purpose in writing the book was to expose the vast inequalities that are present in today's schools. He provided a snapshot of many different ways schools are unequal: funding, teacher quality, school environment, materials, and more. He profiled several different schools, in particular, inner-city Chicago schools and suburban Chicago schools (New Trier), to show the vast differences in every aspect of these schools, and the effects that these differences had on the students.

Kozol also intended to show the multitude of different issues that went into creating the problem, such as lack of funding, lack of materials, lack of quality teacher, political laziness or outright disdain (towards inner-city schools), parent misinformation (or lack of information), lack of parental education and knowledge about the system, and more. These differences all account for why the schools are so vastly different; money is not the only problem and simple solution.

Kozol accomplished his purpose. As one is reading the book, one is filled with shock, horror, and indignation at the vast inequities that exist in the schools. One particularly telling section is his illustration of the kindergarten students, who Kozol describes as bright and eager to learn, even in the

inner-city. However, these kids - who have every ability to learn - are given few materials and poor teachers, and they fail to thrive.

This failure, he explains, results from the education system failing them, and not from their own lack of anything. He clearly illustrates the unfairness of the school system, and proposes some interesting solutions. In the kindergarten class in one of Kozol's examples, there are no pictures on the wall, there are ancient textbooks, there are few toys to play with, and there is a teacher who is almost too tired to care. The teacher knows that whatever happens, many of these students will drop out of high school, and many of those will land in jail. The teacher does not believe that she can make a difference, even though at this age, with the students eager and primarily well-behaved, she could.

The purpose was well accomplished because of Kozol's many examples. The way he used the case studies was especially interesting. In the case of New Trier, the parents were unwilling to tax themselves at a high rate, but their income and property values were so high that they will had plenty of money. Therefore, the school had excellent class offerings, facilities, teachers, and students. In poorer districts, like Lawndale, parents taxed themselves as much as they could, and they still couldn't afford to have good school buildings, new materials, and good teachers. This difference in personality and attitude of the people in the district further illustrates Kozol's point.

In addition, Kozol highlights the sheer environment differences in the schools. In the suburban districts, teachers come in everyday, on time - or they are subject to discipline or being fired. He quotes one principal in an

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inner-city school as saying " I take everything that comes through the door," which means that teachers who are absent more often than not, or who show up a couple hours late everyday still have jobs. These environments portray a complete lack of caring on the part of the teachers.

This is at least in part because the teachers truly believe they cannot make a difference. Many know that most of the students will drop out of school and end up in prison, illiterate, and with no job or a poor job. Some teachers even see this effect as positive, stating that the kids who really care remain in school until graduation. However, this is a terrible way to think about students, and only perpetuates the situation.

Also, the suburban schools tend to be newer, brightly lit, with plenty of classrooms and bathrooms and decorations. The urban schools are lucky to have one working bathroom that isn't clean, dark windows, and a building that is falling apart around them. In some cases, urban schools have extremely overcrowded classrooms, no working bathrooms, no libraries, no computers, no decorations, and are extremely depressing. Students begin skipping school at a young age merely to avoid these circumstances.

Kozol also discusses the attitudes of the law makers. Many refuse to spend more money on these failing schools because it would, in their estimation, be like " pouring money into a black hole." In other words, useless. This goes to show that government officials are not doing anything to solve the problem; in fact, they often are the problem, by refusing to believe that anything could change. Their lackadaisical attitude needs to turn around; rather than rewarding the students who are already succeeding, they should attempt to

help the students who struggle, who will only turn around if the law makers choose to do their job and advocate for all students.

The section on Corla Hawkins's class was particular interesting. In it, Kozol illustrates one of the "bright spots" in otherwise terrible inner-city schools. Ms. Hawkins is a unique teacher who cares about her students, who makes sure they come to school, who forces them to respect each other and each other. She spends a lot of her own money on supplies for the classroom, including a set of encyclopedias. She assigns homework everyday in order to promote responsibility.

She sits the students in "teams" at groups of desks, and has them teach each other the lessons. Her emphasis means that students in her class succeed much more than the average student in the school. Ms. Hawkins also teaches the students important social skills. She doesn't give grades at all in the first quarter; she gives team grades in the second; she gives pair grades in the third; she gives individual grades in the fourth. In this way, she teaches the kids to learn before being competitive about grades, and then to help one another and cooperate more than compete. Later, she teaches the students to look out for themselves.

One of the unfortunate problems with this is that these students will have one year of excellent teaching, and then will go back to the "typical" way that things are in inner-city schools, meaning that their chances of success are still fairly low overall. It also gives the students a taste of what could have been, which means that overall, one good teacher doesn't change anything.

The best solution is to correct the problem by changing the way the schools are financed. Instead of refusing to put money into the schools, politicians should be eager to put more money into them, enough to build new buildings (or improve the current ones) and to hire truly qualified teachers. If that occurs, change will begin at the bottom levels, as students come in and find teachers with higher expectations, and materials to support learning. People need to stop being completely hopeless about these schools and these students and start giving them what they need. Without the proper materials and quality teachers, there is no way that students will care, or learn.

In some states, school funding is done in an unconstitutional way. In fact, in most states, schools are funded at least in part by property taxes. This offers an immediate inequity, since poorer areas, like inner-city areas, will automatically have lower property values, and therefore, less money for schools. A new funding plan that distributes money more equally, or based on need, is in order. A suburban school with already current materials, computers, and new buildings does not need as much money as an inner-city school with old materials, no technology, and a crumbling building.

Currently, the thinking in education is to give money to the students and districts who are already winners. Money is allotted as a prize for success. This value needs to change, so that money is given based on need, because the value is success and opportunity for everyone, not just for the privileged few.

Reading this book changes one's view on the way schools are handled in this country. It seems perfectly fair to grow up in a privileged district, and to go

into education as someone who wants to continue that tradition of excellence. However, confronting the problems that face many schools today shows that education is not perfect, and not every school or student is nearly as lucky as some.

This new realization will change the way a person looks at being an administrator. Perhaps, instead of fighting for every dollar for a particular school's excellent AP program, one would choose to distribute that money to districts who do not have things they need. Or, instead of purchasing new textbooks frequently and getting rid of the old ones, one might choose to buy new textbooks for another school, or to donate older (but still fairly recent) ones to a school in need.

Also, when it comes to making policies, one might choose to consider what is best for all students, rather than only a small group. Many of the students in a poorer district do not have anyone to advocate for them. Their teachers and politicians mostly will not, and their parents may not know how to. Some people in their district, and some of the students themselves, may not even speak English. An administrator from any district may be able to stand up and fight for them. If enough administrators begin to value equality in education (and separate is not equal, whether it is separated by race or social class), changes will begin to occur.

This book is a very eye-opening look at the reality of schools today. It is an important thing to realize - not all schools are equal. Many students are suffering because of the lack of opportunity their schools provide, ultimately setting them up for near certain failure. The only way this will change is if educators stand up and fight for change, and an educator who has not

learned about these inequalities will not be able to stand up and fight. Every educator should know what is really going on.

This book comes highly recommended. Kozol goes into the schools and paints vivid pictures of what the schools are actually like. He's not writing from a high horse or a strictly academic perspective. He is showing what the day to day realities are for so many students. He is high-lighting the problems in a completely real-world way. Kozol's book is an important one in the field, and one that everyone should read.

Bibliography

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