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Book Review: *Savage Inequalities*, by Jonathan Kozol (1991)

Damian N. Bariexca

Rider University

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Throughout the approximately 30 cities Jonathan Kozol visited as he conducted preliminary research for his book *Savage Inequalities* (1991), the scenery changes, but two factors remain constant: money, or rather, the lack thereof, and racial segregation. In his book, Kozol describes a series of travels he undertook between 1988 and 1991 to some of the poorest (both in terms of economics and general conditions) schools and school districts in the United States. What he claims shocked him the most was the “remarkable degree of racial segregation that persisted almost everywhere” (Kozol, 1991, p. 2). Perhaps less surprising is his discovery that in these primarily Black, low-income areas, the quality of public education is atrociously inadequate. Kozol identified six school districts in his book in which *de facto* racial segregation is one of the primary contributing factors to this condition, along with school funding and tax schemes that unfairly favor the rich, thereby widening the gap between rich and poor and practically ensuring that the children who attend schools in these areas will never leave them. The solution, says Kozol, lies in the funding: create a system in which schools in impoverished areas are given the same economic opportunities as schools in rich areas, and children will leap at the chance to make more of their lives than what is currently possible due to the education we afford them.

How Multiculturalism Can Help

Although money, Kozol posits, sits at the heart of this problem, resolving the issue is not as simple as sending districts such as East St. Louis or Camden more money. Multiculturalists would argue that what leads to such economic and physical segregation in the first place is the attitude of those in power. In a November 2005 interview with *NEA Today* magazine, over 15 years since he started his research on *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol reiterated the sentiment he voices in his book: “Once you cordon off a group of children in a form of physical sequestration, it is much easier to cheat them” (Jehlen, 2005). One of the more striking examples of this segregation occurs in southern New Jersey. At the time of writing, Camden was the fourth-poorest city in the nation. What was at one time an

economic boom town has seen all of the major industries flee the area, leaving behind an impoverished city whose entire property wealth of \$250,000 is less than the value of one casino in nearby Atlantic City (Kozol, 1991). The two-story junior high school Kozol visited has a 98% Black or Latino student population. Facilities and materials are substandard (outdated typewriters and textbooks, no lab stations in science classrooms, no computers, tiles falling from the ceiling), and student achievement is low. Camden High School is in no better shape: due to increased emphasis on standardized test scores, teachers teach almost exclusively to these tests. Failure to do so would cut Camden off from what little state funding they currently receive.

Kozol compares the state of Camden's schools to those of its neighbor, Cherry Hill. Cherry Hill is an affluent district with current curricular materials, updated, well-kept facilities, and small class sizes. It is a world removed from Camden, although it is only a five-minute drive away. The students Kozol interviews remark that if Cherry Hill students were to be integrated into the Camden school system, their parents would spend untold amounts of money to bring the school up to their standards. One student contends that, "So long as there are no white children in our school, we're going to be cheated" (Kozol, 1991, p. 155). This sentiment is echoed throughout Kozol's travels: economically disadvantaged areas are populated mostly by Black and Latino minorities. Because property values are so low, schools that take their funding from property taxes in these areas are required to meet the same state standards as richer schools with far less money. This scenario is also played out in East St. Louis, San Antonio, New York City, and other cities across America. Money may be the most immediate need for these schools, but from a multicultural standpoint, these districts must first have racial integration – it is the only way to ensure that the money serves its intended purpose.

Changing Policy, Practices, and Methods

Kozol posits, throughout his book, that integrating these schools would serve multiple purposes: in the short term, it would more evenly distribute funding and benefit schools in poor areas.

In the long term, however, putting children of different racial and ethnic backgrounds together should help to decrease or eliminate the feelings of fear and hostility that led to this segregated school system in the first place and, hopefully, decrease the chances of such systems continuing to exist in the future. With this suggestion, Kozol seems to even address the concerns of multiculturalism's critics like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Diane Ravitch: by bringing races together, Kozol would have them form relationships that transcend racial and economic boundaries. Proponents of multiculturalism are also satisfied in that segregation is ended and more equitable economic solutions can be determined. It seems at though the concept of desegregating schools should not even have to be suggested in America in 1991, but sadly, Kozol's research proves otherwise.

Once the school districts are de-segregated, only then can true economic reform come about. Kozol argues that this reform is a must if children in poor areas are ever to have a chance at an adequate public education. He cites Berkeley University professor of law John Coons' assertion that "the existing [public school funding] system [is] a scandal" due to the "artificial advantage" it creates for the children of the wealthy (as cited in Kozol, 1991, p. 206). Coons continues to describe the current educational funding program as the most "powerful force for rigidity of social class and the frustration of natural potential" (as cited in Kozol, 1991, p. 207). The evolution of "magnet schools" or similar systems-within-systems serves to fragment the disadvantaged even further, by separating the very poor from the less poor. Kozol noted such phenomena in San Antonio and New York City (Kozol, 1991). While he does not explicitly state a "recipe" for fixing the current system, the associated ills Kozol addresses all return to the same concept: integration. When students are integrated, funds will be distributed more evenly, and while these problems will not disappear, their impact will certainly be lessened, and the American public education system will then be able to say that all students are given fair opportunities to succeed.

Leadership Profiles

In order to integrate the school systems per Kozol's proposal, one might think a complete overhaul of school personnel is necessary. In some cases, this is probably true – Kozol speaks critically of the teacher who he learns sleeps during class and allows his students to watch television, for instance (Kozol, 1991). It also true that in order to implement a multicultural approach, the teachers must be fully invested in doing so; they cannot “fake it” and maintain an effective multicultural learning environment. More money would allow local principals to hire brighter, more talented teachers. However, many of the teachers Kozol observed were described as competent and dedicated, if not outstanding, and as such, probably represent only a small portion of the problem.

The school leadership – principals, superintendents, and other building administrators – seem to be Ground Zero for affecting change. They do not have much, if any, control over districting and the extant segregation, but they are responsible for setting the tone of their schools. Kozol notes that many administrators in segregated areas seem reluctant to admit that they are segregated, or just seem to have accepted this segregation as “so immutable, so absolute, that it no longer forms part of their thinking... ‘Equality’ ...is not, it seems, a realistic part of their ambition” (Kozol, 1991, p. 151). Establishing a mindset of social justice and equality for all students is key for building leadership: without their personal belief and investment in the process, how can they expect teachers or the community to follow?

Kozol would probably next call for change at the state level in apportioning funds more equally. Too often, says Kozol (1991), when local leadership displeases the state, governors restrict funding as a punitive measure and initiate state-level takeovers of local districts. With less funding and the state looking over its shoulder, the local school board has even less power to initiate change. Because of his critical attitude toward this behavior, it seems that Kozol would be in favor of localizing control over the distribution of funds and keeping state involvement at a minimum.

Of course, this cannot happen unless local leadership is competent and trustworthy. While Kozol has no way to control for this, it seems a fairly obvious assertion to make that if local leadership is to be entrusted with the “keys to the kingdom” in terms of funding and school progress, it should be comprised of individuals who, like the principals and superintendents, are committed to the ideals of equality and fairness for all children, rich, poor, or otherwise.

It seems like such a simple concept: work together, be honest, and do what is right for the children. While Kozol takes liberty to rail against the attitudes toward education of many political conservatives, the education of children is not one that should be politicized, for if it is, we have already failed them. Developing a fair and equitable educational system (including how to fund it) is in the best interest of our nation, regardless of where on the political spectrum one falls. Partisan politics can only muddy the waters and serve to perpetuate the unjust system that has been in place for decades. If Kozol’s dream is truly to be realized, it must be done in true multicultural fashion: a bipartisan, cooperative effort that transcends individual differences for the purposes of serving a greater good.

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