Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools

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Jonathan Kozol is a non-fiction writer, educator, and activist. He is best known for his books on public education. His book, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools*, was published in 1991, which won the New England Book Award. In the interview *On Savage Inequalities: A Conversation with Jonathan Kozol*, he says, "I chose the title *Savage Inequalities* because I was tired of powerful people suggesting that there was some kind of essential savagery in poor black children in America. I wanted to be clear that if there is something savage in America, it is in the powerful people who are willing to tolerate these injustices" (Scherer Marge). Kozol’s book is intended for anyone who is concerned with inequality, democracy, and social justice -- especially parents, educators and policymakers. His tone reveals seriousness, disappointment and criticism about the inequality in America’s education system. His writing is lucid, vivid, moving, powerful and conveying from the beginning. His purpose is to inform the public in general of the vicissitudes and struggles that black children have to face only because they were born into poverty. Moreover, his purpose is to persuade the readers for an integrated and equal public education in the United States.

Background

Kozol’s biggest concerns about public education started when he started teaching at a segregated school in Boston in 1964. A school so crowded and poor that it couldn’t provide his fourth grade students with a classroom and a permanent teacher. He was the 13th teacher they had in the year. After being fired for having his students read a poem from Langston Hughes that was not on the list of "fourth grades poems" because it was "too advanced" as well as "too inflammatory" for the children’s minds (according to school officials), he moved on to a wealthier school and found a much more accommodating system of education with better materials, smaller classes, and more innovation. It was in the fall of 1988, that Kozol started traveling from city to city across the United States, from Illinois to Washington D.C., and from New York to San Antonio,
observing how schools operate and what kind of education they provide. Upon his return from his traveling, he wrote *Savage Inequalities*, a book, that recompiles his observations, excerpts from media sources, newspaper reporters, interviews with school administrator's, teachers, city officials, community leaders, and most importantly, students who provide insightful interpretations of the inequality and segregation they have to face in their schools.

**Argument and Key Ideas**

In *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol uses American history and constructive criticism to make several key points . . . Why our children "innocent souls that have done nothing wrong" have to pay a high price for the poor choices we made? "Why a society as rich and, frequently, as generous as ours would leave these children in their penury and squalor for so long and with so little public indignation?" (49). Kozol argues that although the Brown v. Board of Education decision has passed decades ago stipulating that segregated education was unconstitutional because it was "inherently unequal," black children as well as others minority children (Hispanics) are still facing discrimination and segregation in their schools because of their race, and social condition (3). Furthermore, the inequalities that exist in our public education system are based upon racist public policies controlled by local and state governments (46-48-73-74-88), but the people's cynicism of not believing that the American government wouldn't let this injustice to happen make it no longer a valid argument.

Kozol's other major emphasis is that the failing of poor black children is not due to bad genes, inherited low IQ, laziness, family and cultural background, but the unfairness of our social system: "A system where some children are given the better opportunities, while others are left in the dark. Children in districts having relatively low assessable property values are receiving no public education; rather, it is that they are receiving poorer quality education than that available to children in districts having more assessable wealth" (215). Kozol notes that although money cannot solve all problems in education, it can solve most of them. He suggests that all schools should receive funding and
resources based on needs, arguing that poor school districts have greater needs than those wealthy school districts, the need of dedicated teachers and extra resources (247).

The author also hints that political entities, business corporations, the media, as well as affluent parents who cite the inadequacy of “throwing money into a black hole” (65) and “money is not primarily ‘what works’ in education” (96) uses this as an pretext to ignore the situation. The author claims that the local and state government know the reality of the poor educational quality in certain areas across the nation, but are unwilling to even make an effort to change what their poor choices have caused. Kozol points out that in New York City, 90% of the male jail prisoners are former public school drop-outs and that incarceration of each inmate costs the city nearly $60,000 every year (144), far more than it would cost to provide them a decent education. But at the risk of cynicism, Kozol wisecracks that when it comes to giving an answer to the inequality and failures in the education system, most Americans feel that “they are paying their property taxes to benefit their own kids, not others’ children” (98) and if these “others’ children” fail in their education, it is because of the “cultural background of their parent” which impedes them to improve their financial and social condition (57-162-214). As a psychiatrist told Kozol, white Americans are fed up with hearing about racial injustice. “They see a slipshod, deviant nature -- violence, lassitude, a reckless sexuality, a feverish need to reproduce -- as if it were a character imprinted on black people. The degree to which this racial explanation is accepted would surprise you” (232).

Kozol’s other stand point is that teachers from poor urban schools are not prepared enough with the required skills to manage a classroom that is occupied mostly with students from different social realities and perspectives. He remarks how difficult it is for teachers to understand lives that they have never experienced before; and how impossible it is to teach a student you don’t understand. He quotes, ”It is part of our faith, as Americans, that there is potential in all children” (82). He observes that there are only few like Corla Hawkins that does her best to understand and know her student’s background before teaching.
The last but not least important argument that Kozol contends, it is that the "teaching to the test," which is a methodology schools use to measure its students' skills, it is unfair to those students who have to deal with scarce materials and mediocre teaching. As Ruthie Green Browns, principal of Camden High School says, “In the education catch up game, we are entrapped by teaching to the test. In keeping with the values of these recent years, the states required test results. But it provides us no resources in the areas that count to make this possible” (173).

Based on all these arguments, Kozol calls for a complete reconstruction of our educational system, equalizing the funding on public schools in order to establish a fair and quality education. Furthermore, he claims that equality in education can only be reached through a full racial integration policy within each school.

Chapter One: Life on the Mississippi: East St. Louis, Illinois.

Kozol begins his book by writing about east St. Louis, one of the poorest cities in America. He writes of the inequalities that are present there without reserve. Kozol says that East St. Louis, which is 98% black, has financial, sociological and healthy issues: no garbage collection, deteriorated housing, unemployment, unqualified employers, low income salary ($7,500 yearly), a powerless governing body, transportation of hazardous waste through the city, toxic pollution, no accessible health care insurance, poor nutrition, deficient hospitals and obstetric services, high asthma rates and other diseases, high infant death rate, underimmunization of young children, children dental problems, 24 hour liquor stores, strip bars, gambling houses, prostitution, homicides, crimes, drug dealers, destitution and segregation.

Kozol also detects that additional problems exist in the schools themselves. The infrastructure of the schools are crumbling, the school’s heating system doesn’t work, and sewage backs up into its bathrooms, at times flooding the basement and the kitchen of the school. There are also no working toilets, no paper towels, no soaps, no working drinking fountains, no sport or musical programs that at least, distract or inspire the children’s souls. Moreover, the author observes that teachers are not able to teach
properly because they lack of school' supplies, they feel intimidated by the challenge of
their job or simply because they don't care about teaching anymore. A lot of these
teachers are full time substitutes without the proper qualifications who received $10,000
yearly. Most of them are the replacement of teachers who were laid off. In the case of the
students, they are in overcrowded classes (30 to 35 students per class) because of the
insufficiency of space. They don't have textbooks to study from, no access to computers,
no typing class, no art supplies, no weight lifting equipment, no locker rooms. The
physics labs haven’t been used for 25 years since there is a lack of water; and the sports
field is in really bad condition to the point of not being serviceable. At the high school
level, there are high teenage girl pregnancy rate and high dropout rate. Students are
totally conscious that the government is not treating them fairly. They know that there is
few opportunities that remain open to them while a lot of glorious opportunities are
given to their affluent counterparts. These opportunities include innovated teachers,
new books, material supplies, modern labs, computers, gym, air conditioner, cafeterias,
even Olympic swimming pools.

Chapter Two: Other People's Children: North Lawndale and the South Side of
Chicago.

Here, Kozol transports the audience to a different scenery, another neighborhood
in Chicago called North Lawndale. He describes Lawndale as an old and abandoned
industrialized city. It was Martin Luther King’s neighborhood. This city has one bank,
one supermarket, 48 state lottery agents and 99 licensed bars and liquor stores. In the
supermarkets, food is of poor quality and overpriced. There are a few factories, high
unemployment rate, high young people death rate (between the ages of 18 to 30), high
infant’s brain damage rate, gang organizations, and crime.

While Kozol is in North Lawndale, he visits Mary McLeod Bethune School, an
elementary school with some of the poorest students in the city. There, he decides to
make a stop at a kindergarten class and what he notices is that this school is also in
terrible condition. There are no school supplies, no books, no science lab, no art or music
teachers, no playground, unmotivated children, unqualified teachers, low income teachers ($40,000 yearly), lot of substitutes, and high dropout rate. Based on his observation, Kozol figures out that out of a kindergarten class of 23 kids, 14 will dropout, 4 may go to college, 1 may graduate, and 12 of the boys in this class will already have spent time in prison (55). However, everything he finds out wasn’t bad after all. There, he meets a fifth-sixth grade teacher named Corla Hawkins. Kozol describes her room as bright and colorful, equipped with encyclopedias, dictionaries, books and plants that adorn her classroom; things that she bought with her own salary. He remarks that Mrs. Hawkins really cares about the students. She teaches three things: self-motivation, self-esteem, and you help your sister and your brother (58-63). Then, in this chapter, Kozol compares that today, in Illinois as elsewhere in America, the students investment range in the poorest district schools is about $2,100 and in the richest district schools is about $10,000 (66). Moreover, the top salary of a teacher in an underprivileged urban school is $40,000 yearly while in a wealthy suburb school is up to 60,000 dollars (85). Kozol notices that principals and teachers have no other choice than to "frame their language carefully" when requesting grants or money from "private sector partners" or "business Partner" (100).

Chapter Three: The Savage Inequalities of Public Education in New York.

Kozol continues his traveling to New York City. There, the author identifies the similar problems from the previous cities he already visited. The city lacks of competent local leaders, and what rules out this city is a bureaucracy system. Public School 261 and Public School 79 in district 10, are overcrowded; children are forced to learn in a limited space capacity with broken windows and no ventilation system. The gym doesn’t serve its purpose because those are used as segmented classrooms. The school’s population are in its majority Blacks, and Hispanics, few students are Whites, Asian and Middle Eastern. After viewing the awful conditions of these schools, Kozol visits Public School 24 located in Riverdale, a wealthy suburban city in New York. There, the school is in excellence condition and the students enjoy of dedicated teachers, special programs and
computers labs. Here, a school receive $11,000 per student while poor urban schools receive $6,000 per student. Kozol emphasizes that the difference between the amount of money that the urban and suburban schools receive per student depends basically of the property value of the houses around them. Kozol also notes that this inequality in funding affects the poor black students in New York; they find themselves going to school in detrimental conditions which in turn, affects the way they are taught and learn.

Chapter Four: Children of the City Invincible: Camden, New Jersey.

In this chapter, Kozol introduces the audience to Camden City, New Jersey. Camden is the fourth-poorest city of more than 50,000 people in the US. In 1985, a quarter of its families made an income less than $5000 annually. This city has abandoned houses, few factories, no new car dealership, no movie theater, few restaurants, one chain supermarket, sewers in bad condition, toxic pollution, and 200 liquor stores and bars. Camden’s schools also presents the similar situations from the previous schools Kozol visited. Here, Kozol visit three high schools: Pyne Point Junior High well known for its strong smell of ether or some kind of glue that seems emitted by the paper factory; Candem High and Woodrow Wilson High School well known for its high dropout rate.

Kozol, in his attempt to know the reality of these schools better, he interviews the principal to talk about the relationship of the teaching to the test program and the high dropout rate and what they would do with equal funding. He also talks face to face with some students and finds out talented students that will have little chances to succeed. As the principal says, “For the brightest kids, the ones who have a chance at four-year college, we cannot provide an AP program. We don’t have the funds of facilities” (181). In general, Kozol identifies that there are many problems in the education system such as lack of tutoring for the states tests, lack of counseling for the students who want to make a career, lack of local management, incompetent and conformist school’s administrators that don’t do anything to make their voices heard, and affluent middle to upper class parents who resist equal funding.
Chapter Five: The Equality of Innocence: Washington, D.C.

In this chapter, Kozol visits an elementary school in Anacostia, Washington D.C. and finds out that children are totally conscious that they are not receiving the same opportunities as affluent students; they feel left out by the government. The author also observes that within their innocence, these children still have a pretty good outlook, but their perception will change as they grow older. The fact that they also have to deal with an absent parent, abusive parent, or not even living with their parents but living with friends or grandparents, crime, drugs, and segregation, push them to start working earlier, have children, or get into illegal activities.

Kozol also finds out that the race plays in a important role in public schools. He notes that the race of administrators and teachers can affect the people’s perception on how they look at public schools. Moreover, students may behave differently in front of their school administrators and teachers depending on the color of their skin (with familiarity or mistrust). He also talks with wealthy parents as well as poor parents about the correlation between the inequality in funding and the failure of poor black students. He says that affluent parents don’t like to admit that money is the problem. They prefer to blame the cultural background of poor black children as the cause of their failure at school. Kozol also points out that many schools in Massachusetts as in Michigan are waiting for suburban legislators to approve part of their budget so they can receive it on time; but as always because the education of poor children is not of their interest, it has to wait. As a result, supplies are not ordered, teachers are left out without contracts, summer workshops to prepare the academic team for a new program, and computer workshops are postponed or even cancelled (246).

Chapter Six: The Dream Deferred, Again, in San Antonio.

In the book’s last chapter, Kozol discusses the inequality and the different attempts and fails of different school districts (California, New Jersey, New York, Chicago) trying to gain more financial help. Kozol reveals that there are top officials as well as wealthy parents who prefer to go to court and spend huge amounts of money
rather than investing this money on the education of poor children. Kozol also briefly emphasizes about a case action suit filed in 1968 by a resident of San Antonio named Demetrio Rodriguez and by other parents on behalf of their own children who are students of the Edgewood district in Texas. Although the parents pay one of the highest tax rates in the area, the district could raise only $37 for each pupil. Other schools receive between $231 to $543 on each pupil. In 1971, the courts then found that Texas was in violation of the equal protection clause of the U.S Constitution. So, the court passed the Brown vs. Board of Education law which states that education must be equal for all. But, after 23 years that Demetrio Rodriguez went to court, Kozol still concludes that improvements in education has changed only superficially and that the children of the poorest schools in Texas are still waiting for an equal chance in education (277).

**Arguing Kozol's Views**

It is not common to see an author who describes, exposes and comprehends the deeply roots of inequality in American System so well -- a social and ethical issue that most people prefer to ignore than to open a discussion. One thing that is admirable about Kozol is his ethics-moral position and what he stands for. Kozol’s narrative approach doesn’t only bring to light the awful truth about the American school system, but also the socio-economic crisis of certain cities around the United States. Although Kozol’s narrative approach is interesting, provoking, appealing, and strongly emotional, he misses a series of concrete and functional solution to his arguments.

I certainly agree with most of Kozol’s arguments that in the realm of desegregation, there has been no improvement since the Brown vs. Board of Education decision took action. And what is more disappointed is that no one in particular wants to take responsibility for what seems to be a hopeless situation. As a society, we need the participation of everybody in order to pursue equality, integration, and fair competition in what our social roles refers to. But what is most common to see is that wealthy families are moving out to different neighborhoods, pulling their kids from public school systems, building boundaries in the school districts line, instead of building
integrated schools. "The Dream," Martin Luther King’s vision of a nation in which black and white children went to school together was “treated as a closed box that could not be opened without spoiling the celebration” (4). "We have a school...named for Dr. King,” said one 14 year-old girl, “The school is full of sewer water and the doors are locked with chains. Every student in that school is black. It’s like a terrible joke on history.” (43)

Financially speaking, I agree with Kozol to some degree that unfair distribution of funding in schools reduces the children’s opportunities of competition to fulfill the different roles in society. Certainly, money can serve to improve school infrastructure, obtain better school’s supplies, improve teacher’s salary, provide programs that innovate teachers as well as the students, etc. However, there are many other factors that contribute to inequality on education that Kozol briefly touched in his book, lack of teacher preparedness and motivation, the lack of curriculum reform, lack of competent school’s administrators, the lack of governmental interest to face this issue, the social and economical crisis of urban areas, (unemployment, crime, lack of housing, etc), the lack of parents’ involvement in the education of their children, as well as other factors. If the author would have focused more on those issues as he did for the financial problems and bring new and practical proposals to his arguments, then his book would have convinced me a hundred percent and fulfill my expectations without criticism. And after 23 years of his book publication, we would have seen radical changes in the public education system. There is no doubt that federal funds in education has been fairly distributed in our schools, but schools are still funded primarily by local property taxes, guaranteeing that affluent school districts will produce better educated and competent children to fulfill the most important roles in our society. The reality is that our children are still separated and unequal.

However, providing equal funding to the schools is not all. While there is some school administrators that make the right choices on how to spend the funding based on students’ needs (tutoring, counseling, teachers innovation), there are some administrators that in their attempt to invest the funding in the schools, are more concerned about the schools’ facade than the students’ learning. As Joe Williams cites in
his new book, Cheating Our Kids (p.7), "In Kansas City, Missouri, a court ordered that an extra $2 billion be spent over a dozen years ($167 million per year between the mid-1980s and late 1990s) to improve education for minority students. School officials used the unprecedented cash infusion to boost teacher salaries and build 15 new schools. They included such pricey luxuries like an Olympic-size swimming pool with an underwater viewing room, television and animation studios, a robotics lab, a 25-acre wildlife sanctuary, a zoo and a model United Nations chamber with simultaneous translation capability. Unfortunately, after a dozen years very little had really changed and the district still failed to meet any of the state’s performance standards. Structure matters in education, particularly when school systems are configured in ways that assure that the needs of adults are addressed first and foremost" (Tilson Whitney). Certainly, Williams statement is right. Money is important, but if our school administrators don’t know how to manage it, and don’t have the commitment to improve the American education system, the most affected will be the future of our children -- a future without expectative, vision, and hope on what they aspire to be.

Evaluating Kozol’s Book

In my criteria, Savage Inequalities, is an original and powerful book. It is original because it differs from the common ideas that everyone receives an equal education in the United States. It is powerful because it introduces us to sceneries, that perhaps many of us never have imagined before -- misery, segregation, abandonment, discrimination, violence, and inequality in education. Although at times, the book seemed a bit repetitive in its statistical information, the seriousness of the issues and the children’s insightful interpretations of the reality of the world and their daily lives is what captivated the most and what kept me focused on the narrative. I was able to compare that this reality is not an isolated problem of a specific area, but a reality everywhere in America. Testimonies like Shalika who suffered racial discrimination at school (43), Keisha who was denied the opportunity to go to a better school district (82), Tunisia who dreamed of a beautiful school (218), Arturo--the Puerto Rican kid who said "Why should I go to war and fight for opportunities I can’t enjoy--for things rich people value for their
own freedom, but I do not have the freedom, and I can’t not go their schools” (127) are not only life examples of maturity they gain through the vicissitudes they have to face, but also are vivid representations that inequality in education still exists.

Although *Savage Inequalities* has been written more than two decades ago, I believe it still deserves to be used as a source of discussion since education hasn’t improved much since then. Certainly, Kozol’s view is an awakening vision, and idealism of social change because it attempts to shift the education system to be more equal regardless of race, ethnicity or social condition. Accepting this idealism will take time since those who have the power of making changes in America stand first for their political positions than their own countryman.

I truly believe that every child has the potential to be anything they want to be and it is our role to provide them with equal access and opportunities. America is a role model in the eyes of the world because of its generosity and compassion to others, but *How can we continue to be a good role model to rest of the world when we as brothers and sisters do not help each other in our own home? How can we continue to be a good role model to the rest of the world when our own children are submerged in the misery and the abandonment due to greed and denied of equal access and opportunities?* Today, lets provide them equal access and opportunities and tomorrow we will see the fruits of our efforts and sacrifices: less poverty, less ignorance, less drug addiction, less prisoners and more EQUALITY, PROSPERITY and HAPPINESS pursuits. *After all, that is what America is built on, isn’t it?*
References

