

Kozol Essay: Justifications for de facto segregation in Contemporary US Schools.

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Introduction

In *The Shame of the Nation*, Jonathan Kozol paints an elaborate and disheartening portrait of the educational system in the United States, exposing the inequalities and de facto segregation that runs rampant throughout the country. Published in 2005, Kozol's snapshot of that time is bleak; and while the details may have changed in the intervening years, the core injustices remain the same today. Kozol describes a system in which public schooling is offered to all children, but is implemented in dramatically different ways depending on the social, economic, and demographic status of each school's student body. In wealthy areas (often suburban and predominantly white), students are provided with plentiful opportunities and a liberal arts education which prepare them to advance to college. Meanwhile, in impoverished areas (often urban and predominantly non-white), schools are routinely underfunded, with insufficient infrastructure and limited curricula which communicates low expectations of their unlucky students.

Kozol writes that in impoverished schools, a rich liberal arts curriculum is sometimes replaced with a highly structured, scripted curriculum focusing on memorization, discipline, and exceedingly basic reading and math skills. In secondary school, Kozol describes numerous situations where students are funnelled into courses that prepare them to enter the workforce directly and are offered limited academic course options. In this type of setting, even bright and promising students are inadequately prepared for college or the higher-paying jobs that college attendance would allow them to pursue. The inequality apparent between public schools in wealthy and impoverished areas would be shameful on its own, but furthering the tragedy is that people of color are disproportionately affected by underfunded schools, maintaining a vicious

cycle of social and racial inequality. Throughout *The Shame of the Nation*, Kozol describes his investigation of this unequal system and recounts the justifications used to propagate these inequalities despite their existence being widely recognized.

Segregation as social reform

One such justification for subjecting minority students to limited--and limiting--curricula is the claim that urban youth require a different type of education in order to keep them from a life of crime. Many impoverished and minority students live in areas plagued with unpleasant statistics like high crime rates, large or single-parent families, and parents who work multiple jobs. It is said that such circumstances lead to parents who are unable or unwilling to play an active role in their children's educations, and to unruly and unintelligent children who are statistically likely to enter the prison system. In such areas, racially segregated schools with "specialized" curricula are seen as a targeted intervention for the benefit of minority students, and is touted as a progressive reform (Kozol, 2005, p. 20).

Kozol spends large portions of *The Shame of the Nation* recounting details from minority-dominated classrooms in which these strict curricular programs replace the liberal arts instruction model enjoyed by so many privileged children. One of these programs, "Success For All" (SFA), is mentioned throughout the text as Kozol observes its implementation throughout multiple states and districts. As it is described, the program is highly controlled and drill-based, focused on lower-level thinking skills like rote memorization and recitation. Its purpose as described by the schools which embrace it is to ensure that all students reach the state standards. However, in Kozol's direct observation of SFA, he describes robotic verbal exercises and

disciplinary routines that can best be described as “Skinnerian”, training students to respond in scripted ways, using much the same tactics as those used to train dogs. Students are furthermore trained to react submissively to a “teacher” who acts more like a foreman than an educator (Kozol, 2005, p. 65-67).

These programs often emphasize preparation for an adulthood in blue-collar careers, and send the message to students that the most prestigious career goal within their reach is that of a “manager” (Kozol, 2005, p. 92). Implicit in such a program is the idea that the unlucky students enrolled in these schools need not even consider college, or attaining careers wished for by children in wealthier districts: doctors, lawyers, artists, or even teachers. A principal at one such school explained the “benefit” of this message to her students: “We want [the students] to understand that, in this country, companies will give you the opportunities to work, to prove yourself, no matter what you’ve done” (p. 93).

Another principal at a Chicago school was quoted responding to a criticism that his school was turning children into “robots”: “Did you ever stop to think that these robots will never burglarize your home... never snatch your pocket books... are going to be producing taxes...?” (Kozol, 2005, p. 98). Certainly, if these schools were rehabilitating felons, that might be a laudable goal--but is it enough to educate children in this manner? Is it truly beneficial to these students to have all options snatched from them, and to be seen as the inevitable next generation of criminals at worst, and middle managers at best?

Proponents of SFA and similar programs claim that they are well-suited to the specialized needs of low-income urban students (Kozol, 2005, p. 64). The suggestion seems to be that allowing freedom of critical thought in this population is disadvantageous to these children; that

instead, they benefit most from a militaristic, uniform program of instruction, relentlessly pinned to predetermined standards in such a way that there is no room for interpretation or imagination from either teacher or student (p. 64).

Still other schools receive grants from businesses to replace liberal arts classes with those in practical work experience, claiming that it is unethical to offer rigorous academic classes to students who lack reading and math skills at the secondary level (Kozol, 2005, p. 99). This sort of thinking might be appropriate for students at the secondary level who, despite receiving rigorous instruction in their elementary years, choose independently to pursue career training. In reality, disadvantaged students are placed on this “school-to-work” track much earlier than high school. In these districts, students might start their school careers in elementary school in scripted curriculum programs and never be provided opportunities for critical thought in school, nor the foundations they would need to succeed in rigorous academics in high school, nevertheless college. Likely, bright young men and women are stuck in this system that otherwise would be capable of attending college, earning a higher salary than their parents might have been able to, and contributing to our society in more meaningful ways.

Despite the systematic way in which these students are funnelled back into lower-income jobs, the continuation of “school-to-work” initiatives are lauded as progressive and even revolutionary. Those who espouse this idea look to theorists like Charles Murray, author of “The Bell Curve,” who claim that students in urban areas with “disorganized homes” thrive in and even perhaps even require militaristic education (Kozol, 2005, p. 105). Though Murray wrote his book in the early 1990’s, his ideas continue to be used to justify this practice. Even at the writing of this paper in 2018, it is commonplace to hear people in wealthy (predominantly white)

school districts expressing similar ideas. Perhaps they would agree, too, that it is best to think of “urban” (minority) children as innate threats to life and property, and that the best approach is to form them from birth into obedient, tax-paying robots.

The negative effect of this type of thinking on minority children is incalculable; they are designated from an early age as less valuable than more affluent, white students, and classified in the hearts and minds of society as simply “ghetto.” Eventually, the students themselves learn to embrace themselves as “ghetto,” and come to believe that any hope of social mobility is simply unattainable (Kozol, 2005, p. 180).

Segregation as an unfortunate consequence of unequal wealth distribution

Even progressive people who would look negatively upon the practices of the aforementioned programs have their own justification for why their own privileged children should receive a better education than others in the public education system. For many parents, they see public schooling as a zero-sum game, a system in which others must suffer in order for their own children to get ahead.

One such example of this phenomenon is evident in New York City. Kozol describes organized parent groups in New York who have petitioned to stop allowing minority children, who sometimes travel long distances, to attend schools in their neighborhood (Kozol, 2005, p. 30). They justified this request by claiming they simply wanted an “old-fashioned sense of community” (p. 31) and to rebuild the schools as upscale institutions to provide the children of the wealthy in New York “an education on par with the best suburban high schools” (p. 31).

These parent groups are well-meaning, and are obviously heavily invested in their children's education. Their efforts are often viewed as the "good fight" of parents who just want the best for their children. For wealthy families who have the time and money to spare, it is typical for parent groups to fundraise to improve their schools, hire more teachers, create enrichment programs, or make renovations. Upper-class, educated parents may also have knowledge, skills and resources that others do not: for example, time to research school grants and the writing skills to apply for them (Kozol, 2005, p. 48). Kozol quotes a parent who perfectly embodies this sense of upper-class parental privilege: "Inequality is not an intentional thing... you have schools that are empowered and you have schools that have no power at all... I don't bear any guilt for knowing how to write a grant." (p. 49).

However, this phenomenon has the unfortunate consequence of furthering the plight of those students who lose the battle for funding due to their inability to advocate for themselves. In 2001, fearing a "brain drain" as wealthy families considered moving en masse to the suburbs for access to better schools, Chicago used public funds to build tuition-based full-day preschools for wealthy parents in order to retain them in the area (Kozol, 2005, p. 55). This, according to Kozol, occurred while 7,000 low-income children had no access to preschools whatsoever.

Still others deny that funding is even a factor in educational inequality. Kozol writes about a statement made by George W. Bush to the National Urban League in 2001, where he agreed that educational equality is vital to social equality, but denied the idea that additional funding would help improve urban schools. He likened federal financial assistance to "pumping gas into a flooded engine" (Kozol, 2005, p. 59). His statement would either suggest that the schools already had too much money flowing into them already (an outrageous claim), or

perhaps it was a clumsily worded statement about the productivity of federal tax dollars in urban schools.

In response to the idea that funds will not improve the plight of impoverished schools, Kozol quotes a former NYC principal, Deborah Meier: “I’ll believe money doesn’t count the day when the rich stop spending money on their own children” (Kozol, 2005, p. 59). Certainly, it may be that dollars pumped into middle- and high-income areas seem to result in more obvious and immediate changes. However, are those changes as societally meaningful?

Aid provided to a low-income district may take time to trickle through to the projects that most require those funds, and perhaps test scores will not improve overnight; after all, how can a grant undo years of systematic educational disadvantages? How can a grant retroactively send a child to preschool, revise their elementary year reading scores, or change a child’s attitude towards an institution that has mistreated them for most of their young life? Certainly, money infused into such a school will not correct the demoralization of their student body within a year, or even several years. Again, the American culture of immediate gratification leads us to believe that if we cannot see the effects of a change immediately, that a change is not being made. However, imagine the difference that we would see after ten or thirteen years in a school district, when the first children who attended pre-K and had reasonable class sizes throughout their school career finally reach graduation, feeling that they have a future in this world.

Conclusion

Kozol makes a strong argument that the American education system is suffering from systemic inequality that is disproportionately targeted at minority children. Through a series of

complex justifications, the desegregation movement of the 1960s and 70s has been slowly undone, resulting in de facto segregation based upon wealth and privilege, and made worse with each successive generation that learns too late that the American dream of social mobility is simply out of reach. Well-meaning attempts at reform have only worsened the situation, as the racist assumptions underlying many of these reforms go unquestioned and unchallenged. The loudest voices are those of the most privileged, who have the time, money, and energy to advocate for better and more enriching educational experiences for their children. Meanwhile, in ghettoized neighborhoods throughout the United States, poor and minority children spend their young lives being trained to expect a lifetime of marginalization.

The answer to how to resolve this vicious cycle is unclear, but one thing is certain; the United States as a whole suffers from it. By elevating students based only on the fortune of their birth, we may be cheating ourselves out of the brilliant minds of children who are cast too early into roles as simple laborers and criminals. The cycle creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where children from poor neighborhoods are kept poor by lack of educational opportunities, and meanwhile the wealth gap between the rich and poor ever widens. This system is neither fair nor democratic, but is rather plutocratic, set up to advantage the wealthy while the poor are offered limited options. The concept of the American dream is poisoned by its continuation, and addressing it will require a serious reassessment of what our priorities as a country should be. Until all children, regardless of race or income, are given equal opportunities, we simply cannot claim to be the land of the free.

References

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