

Democracy & Education

VOLUME 17, NUMBER 1

Savage Inequalities: STILL

2008

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Democracy & Education is a non-profit publication of the
Graduate School of Education and Counseling at Lewis & Clark College

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Savage Inequalities: STILL

An Interview with Jonathan Kozol

Interviewed by Nancy G. Nagel and Sara Guest

It has been more than 15 years since Savage Inequalities was published. Where do you think we are with inequality in schools today?

Extremes in inequality between school districts in low-income inner city districts and affluent suburban districts have not been relieved on a consistent, city-by-city basis. New York City is one classic example. In *Shame of the Nation* I published charts as part of the appendix that show that in many cases inequalities have increased since I originally did my research for *Savage Inequalities*. It seems impossible that this could be the case, but it is. Even when urban schools get more money from their states in a futile attempt to equalize, suburban schools up the ante by spending more.

In terms of particular inequalities, the single most important factor is the quality of teachers and experience of teachers—in these inner city schools, experienced teachers just don't stay. What is their incentive? The second most important factor is class size, but because of inequalities in funding and overcrowding in buildings, children in urban schools are cheated once again. I've visited urban classrooms in the last three years with as many as 38 students in a fifth grade and 40 in a tenth grade class.



What is the tangible impact of these inequalities on students?

For me, this is one of the most reactionary moments in our nation's recent history. Our public schools are more segregated than any time since 1968 and if you share my belief that racial isolation is in itself a destructive force in the education of a child, then our schools are less equal than they've been since the civil rights era of the 1960s. With today's devastating

United States Supreme Court decision overturning policies intended to diversity student enrollments in Kentucky and Washington school districts, it will be that much more difficult to continue voluntary school integration programs. These are not forced policies, these are voluntary. Actually, all the major schools that have in place so-called "school improvement plans"—whether those plans involve more testing, charter schools or more severe accountability—are at this point simply trying to execute postmodern versions of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (the 1896 decision upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation under the doctrine of "separate but equal"). Now, our schools aren't even up to the *Plessy* standards because they're segregated and unequal. We've gone back 111 years.

What can teachers and administrators do to address problems with the system?

On both fronts—segregation and inequality—teachers and administrators have to find the courage to speak out politically; to speak out irreverently and defiantly. Good educators are not merely technicians of “efficiency.” They also need to be our witnesses to what they see before them every day in schools. And as witnesses, they need to testify in public. We need unified efforts so they represent not isolated groups of ethical people but a national force on the scale of the civil rights upheavals.

How are you directly involved in efforts to encourage teachers to speak out?

Since earlier this year I’ve been at work creating a large national network of rightly angry and impatient educators from one side of the nation to the other. The initiative is called Education Action! In the very short time period, we’ve collected 30,000 emails from good teachers, principals and administrators who are outraged by the perpetuation of gross inequality and up in arms about No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which in many ways worsens the inequalities I’ve already described.

Why is No Child Left Behind problematic?

One thing we’ve found is that NCLB, although it applies to all schools, is having a mildly annoying impact on rich suburban schools since these districts know their kids will do well on examinations anyway. In the so-called “low performing” inner-city schools, by contrast, it has introduced a reign of terror, a state of siege. In these schools, principals tell me they’re forced to handle education in ways they personally abhor. For example, turning their schools into virtual test-prep factories where teachers are forced to spend half the school year or more not presenting educational content with the rich cultural depth that is familiar in the suburbs, but drilling children in test-taking strategies so that their school can meet its AYP (adequate yearly progress). This has become a nightmare in these schools, where even the best teachers use a “drill and grill” curriculum.

The White House calls this “research based” but it would never be used in a good suburban district. There’s no time for teachers to teach critical intelligence. Allowing children to ask interesting and discerning questions will get them in trouble with the “curriculum cops”—clipboard bureaucrats sent to schools to enforce NCLB. These standards police ask what standards the teacher is teaching to and the teacher can’t reply that she’s reading a poem she loves. A first grade teacher recently said to me, “What’s beauty got to do with it?” We’re not dealing with just apartheid schools, but apartheid curriculum.

If you could choose one thing to shift the future of education toward a model that’s successful for all, what would it be?

First, don’t fool yourself. There will never be successful schooling of the kind we see in middle-class America so long as we run segregated and unequal schools. Don’t play any games like that with your thinking. Don’t think with a newly fashionable slogan like “small schools” you’re going to have wonderfully successful separate and unequal schools. What we’re talking about here is the oldest failed experiment in United States social history. It didn’t work in the past century any more successfully than it will work in the century ahead. Teachers have to deal with reality. While they serve as clear, outspoken advocates on the biggest issues our schools face, they also have to learn how to survive within the terms of this system.

In my new book *Letters to a Young Teacher* (published August 21, 2007 by Crown Publishers) I devote many chapters to what I call “survival strategies” for high-spirited and independent-minded teachers. Here are three important strategies for helping teachers:

Young teachers need to reach out to veteran teachers and work on developing mentorships and forming personal alliances so they won’t feel isolated when they speak their views;

Teachers should reach out immediately to the parents of students, especially in urban districts. It’s absolutely critical for teachers to cross lines of class and race and not to complain that parents don’t show up to school. Time ought to be spent instead understanding why parents

are intimidated by school—usually because their own experiences were unhappy and school for them is a symbol of fear. I encourage teachers to go to students' homes and establish relationships immediately. When they do, they'll find parents willing to support them if they decide to challenge some of the worst aspects of NCLB.

I urge new teachers not to view their principals as the enemy, which many talented teachers do out of the same inclinations that lead teenagers to dismiss the opinions of their parents. Some principals are hopeless, but most I know are absolutely decent human beings who share the same hostility to testing and standardized high-stakes examinations and "teach to the test" mentalities. They don't say this in public because they can't, but they tell me this privately.

Finally, I urge all teachers to spend time looking for solidarity with other teachers in their districts who have the same impatient political views they do. There's at least one well-organized group of teacher-activists in every major city, cities like Chicago and Minneapolis and Seattle, New York, Boston, and Miami. Portland has a highly-motivated group led by longtime activist (and *Rethinking Schools* editor) Bill Bigelow. And trust me, there's one in your city too.

How is Education Action! involved in ongoing activist efforts?

Currently, Education Action! is pulling together existing activist groups to reinforce their efforts, and also to mobilize isolated groups and isolated teachers on a national basis in order to bring force to bear on Congress and the White House should we have a president sympathetic to our views. We're recruiting teachers and administrators daily and intend to have 300,000 teachers mobilized locally and nationally by the 2008 elections. We're going about this in coordination with a very large sector of the National Education Association (NEA). Education Action! has already brought a team to Washington to present a concrete plan to Democratic members of the Senate Education Committee for a radical revision of NCLB.

To get involved in this effort, go to www.edaction.com or email the coalition at educationactioninfo@gmail.com.

What does this radical revision of NCLB include?

Two core amendments to the existing legislation, one focused on early childhood education and the other on school transfers:

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:

We propose that it is unjust to give high-stakes tests to grade school children if half of them have received rich developmental private preschool since they were two-years-old and the majority of innercity students have had no prekindergarten at all. Right now, Head Start rejects more students than it accepts. States claim to be pursuing universal prekindergarten, but none have yet provided every eligible student with a rich program. We are proposing that no high stakes test given to third grade children may be

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used to penalize a child, school or district until the state certifies that every third grade child has received two full years of preschool education. In order to accomplish this, the federal government would need to quadruple the Head Start budget—which, even if quadrupled, is a small fraction of what we spend each month on the military campaign in Iraq.

TRANSFER PREVISION:

The current NCLB transfer prevision stipulates that students at low performing schools can transfer to a high-performing school in the second year after that school has received a warning. We propose amending this provision to provide federal incentives and/or penalties to states that not only permit but financially subsidize transfers across district lines. In the current system, this transfer provision isn't

working at all—only 2 percent of students have been able to transfer. Revising it would be good for everyone. It's not working now, but with real incentives to school districts that surround major urban districts, the transfer provision can be made highly effective and hundreds of thousands of students who are currently trapped could be going to the best schools in the nation. Best of all, this is a race-neutral policy—students would not transfer because they're black or Latino, but because they now attend chronically low-performing schools. In deference to the President's noble wish to allow these children to attend high-performing schools, we'll counteract the entire impact of the decision handed down today by the Supreme Court. Efficacy schools have never worked; I've been around schools for 40 years. Allowing minority kids to go to the same schools as children of senators, governors and CEOs will close the achievement gap more rapidly than anything we've tried.

In closing, do you have any advice for teachers?

Despite the intensity of the advice I'm giving teachers, the ultimate recommendation I make to teachers of all ages is to refuse to let state or federal regulations take away the sense of joy and sheer delight which are the rewards for teachers who dedicate their lives to children, especially young children. I always tell teachers that no matter how adverse the conditions that you face, celebrate every perishable day and hour in your student's lives. Be as whimsical and playful as they are. Don't lose that exhilaration in your own soul. Even in the most test-driven school, develop a shrewd, sly and mischievous irreverence. This can save the soul of teachers and, of course, it fits nicely with the normal personalities of children. If you need a role model, don't think of the people who write the standards—which are not written by intellectuals, scholars or poets. A better role model would be someone like Fred Rogers. I believe Fred Rogers was the best educator we've known in America in the past several decades and good teachers need to carry on his legacy. After all, it's a beautiful day in the neighborhood.

JONATHAN KOZOL is an educator, activist and writer best known for his compassionate work with urban classrooms, his strong stance as an activist and his books on public education. A Harvard-educated scholar awarded a Rhodes Scholarship, early in his career Kozol was fired from a teaching post with Boston Public Schools for using a Langston Hughes' poem in his curriculum. So began his involvement with the civil rights movement and his journey as a dedicated voice for social justice. Kozol has held two Guggenheim Fellowships, has been a fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation twice, and has received fellowships from the Field and Ford Foundations. He is the author of several groundbreaking works of non-fiction, including *Death at an Early Age*, *Savage Inequalities*, *Ordinary Resurrections* and *The Shame of the Nation* (reviewed in this issue). Currently, Kozol is on the editorial board of *Greater Good Magazine* and has founded the non-profit Education Action!, a group dedicated to the grassroots organizing of teachers who wish to help create a single, excellent, unified system of American public schools. Jonathan Kozol can be reached through Education Action! at www.edaction.com or educationactioninfo@gmail.com.

This interview was conducted on June 28, 2007, the day the Supreme Court of the United States handed down controversial verdicts overturning policies implemented by school districts in Jefferson County, KY and Seattle, WA intended to diversify student populations. These were voluntary policies that took into consideration the race of a student when determining placement into a different school or district. Directly following our interview, Jonathan Kozol spoke with the NAACP about his feelings about this decision and the concerns it raises for educators interested in reversing the inequality that plagues our education system.