Review Essay

Nicholas M. Michelli

Confronting Inequality: The Moral Imperative for Higher Education

Kotlowitz, Alex. **There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America.** *New York: Doubleday, 1991, xi + 324 pp.*

Kozol, Jonathan. **Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools.** *New York: Crown, 1991, ix + 262 pp.*

These are not books explicitly about higher education. They are not books that are likely to be read by professors or administrators other than those professionally interested in schools or life in our cities. That is truly unfortunate. Not only should they be read by anyone concerned about education or, for that matter, about the future of society in the United States of America, but they should be read together, because they emphasize two interrelated dimensions of the inequalities in this society. Alex Kotlowitz focuses on the lives of children outside the schools while providing us with insights into what happens when they are in schools. Jonathan Kozol primarily addresses what happens in schools—schools in which the disparity of resources is beyond what even those who work in schools are likely to realize.

These books should be read by educators in colleges and universities for a number of reasons. They should be read because they describe a state of events that tear at the fabric of the society and that affect all institutions in society, including institutions of higher education. They should be read because colleges and universities have a moral obligation to become involved in seeking solutions to the problems described. They should be read because they are about human beings who are largely unseen and forgotten and who deserve our attention.

Among the strengths of the books is the cumulative effect of the detail, so a flavor of that detail is included here. Nevertheless, this cannot and will not be a "straight" review—one that only summarizes and comments on the conclusions to be found in these books—because the books call not only for intellectual reflection on the horrors represented

here, but also for action. Anyone with responsibilities within one of our major social institutions who has an opportunity to examine the meaning reflected in these works, and who fails to call attention to the possibility of a role for that institution, will have failed in an important responsibility. Anyone who reads the books as an individual and does not see meaning for himself or herself and who does not feel a call to action has failed to comprehend what has been read.

And so this review becomes an exhortation to those of us in ivory towers to become directly involved and committed to solving the problems that emerge on the pages of these remarkable books. Lest you conclude that the cause is hopeless, and will just further drain the resources available to higher education, let me suggest a practical reason for undertaking this effort. The cost of public assistance, the cost of incarceration, the waste of human resources personified in dropouts who become unproductive, and the spread of the drug culture all have negative effects on higher education both in terms of lost students and public resources that could be directed to higher education. Beyond that, we have an obligation to become involved not in spite of the obvious public distaste for real intervention, but because of it. Where else in this society, besides in our colleges and universities, is there a history of windmill tilting?

Kotlowitz's work, *There Are No Children Here,* is by far the more moving of the two, perhaps because it is so personal. With Kotlowitz, we spend a little more than two years—from the late spring of 1987 until September of 1989—with two young boys and their family living in the Henry Horner Projects in Chicago. Eight people usually live in the Rivers family apartment—La Joe, the mother, and her children Lafayette and Pharoah, younger triplets, Timothy, Tiffany and Tammie, and two older sons, Terence and Paul. Her daughter, La Shawn, has left. La Joe has, in a sense, lost her three older children to drugs and the attendant crime, and so her life now focuses on the five youngest. The two boys are ten and seven, and the triplets are four.

These sweet, innocent children are so surrounded by violence, death, poverty, and unfulfilled expectations that it is amazing that they have any dreams or hopes left; but they do. Pharoah and Lafayette are seen in one vignette digging in the hard ground of a mound next to the commuter railroad tracks for snakes, in hope of finding one and taking it home as a pet. When they hear a train coming, though, they cower in fear, for they have heard that commuters sometimes shoot guns out the windows of the trains with unerring accuracy at neighborhood children. The commuters have heard the same about neighborhood children. And, as Kotlowitz notes, for both the boys and the commuters, the unknown was the enemy.

That is an important point, because we think we know. Many of us grew up in or near poverty. We work in urban settings. We spend time in urban schools. We see the kids. We read about drugs and sudden death and poverty, and burned-out cars and homes. Sometimes we see evidence of these things, and we think we know. But, as it becomes clear in the pages of Kotlowitz's book, we have little understanding of the lives of children on these streets. What can they think as they see their friends killed in the crossfire of a drug culture? What can they think when they hear the

gunshots in the middle of the night? When the running water from a broken bathtub is so loud that sleep is impossible? When not only on television, but in real life, a few miles away in the Loop they see wealth and consumption they couldn't have imagined? Kotlowitz reports that, by the summer of 1987, fifty-seven children had been killed in Chicago already that year—some in drug wars, some in fires because firemen could not reach apartments on the fourteenth floor, some in accidents. A few weeks ago, on a trip to Chicago, I tried to get to—or even near— the Horner projects. I felt an overwhelming need to renew my sense of places like that, to be closer to Lafayette and Pharoah. The projects were only about five miles from the relatively plush downtown hotel where I attended a conference on fund raising for college administrators. Four taxis refused to go there. It was broad daylight.

The effect of the life described in these pages is made clear in what may appear to us to be ultimate hopelessness, but which for the Rivers family probably was matter-of-fact reality. When Kotlowitz first met Lafayette, he asked him what he wanted to be. Lafayette said, "If I grow up, I'd like to be a bus driver." Not *when,* but *if.* Kotlowitz discovered that, at age ten, Lafayette wasn't sure he'd make it to adulthood. And how does a mother cope? La Joe, who received about $930 each month through a combination of welfare and food stamps, began in the summer of 1987 to pay $80 a month for burial insurance for Lafayette, Pharoah, and the triplets. But even with this possibility of violence and death, there is hope within the children. Kotlowitz, for example, describes a dream Pharoah has, and in fact attributes the pleasantness of the dream to his anticipation of participating in a spelling bee in school:

> In it, he was a grown man looking for employment, and people down the street were calling him because they might have a job for him. Pharoah was so touched by the fantasy that he remembered the smallest of details, like the blossoming white roses he could see from his office window and his new clothes; a starched white shirt and blue tie with matching vest and pants, and spanking new black shoes. He had indeed gotten the job, and at work people started calling him "the brain." He can't recall what kind of work the job entailed, though he had "a big metal desk, a pencil sharpener, a paperweight, and papers spread all over." He does, however, remember how good the dream made him feel: "I started thinking about if I do be a lawyer or something, then I'd make a better living and my mama be outta the projects." (Kotlowitz, p. 188)

Still later, Pharoah thinks about becoming a congressman.

And what of the schools? There can be no doubt that the schools that Kotlowitz describes are as unequal as the schools Kozol describes with respect to material things—books, paper, film, and the like. But, for these children, they do represent safety and security. Pharoah, for example, exhibits the free and outgoing side of his personality seldom seen outside of school. In the late summer of 1987 when Chicago was in the grips of one of its teachers' strikes, the children and their mothers hoped it would end quickly. Their joy when it finally did end, and the children returned to

school, was clear. Schools, if they are to make a difference, must provide students with vision and with abilities that take them well beyond the traditional basic skills for which the schools can most easily be held accountable through measurement by standardized tests of mathematics and reading. There is little in Kotlowitz to suggest that the schools Pharaoh and Lafayette attend provide much more than security and comfort, along with drill and practice in the basics, as important as that may be. One of the limitations of the book is its emphasis on life outside of schools. What little we see of the two boys' lives in schools makes us want to know more so we better understand the effect of this part of their lives. For Pharoah, who seems to be quite an able student, we find that the most exciting experience he has in school involves competition in a spelling bee. His arduous preparation for success and the importance he gives to the experience represent touching tributes to his deep drive to succeed, but the focus of his efforts suggest deep problems with the schools. No evidence is presented to show any attempt to engage children in creative or critical thinking, to consider the possibilities of life, or even to reflect on the trials of their own lives. Pharoah is involved with a summer Upward Bound experience at a local university, and we wish we could hear more about it. Pharoah embraces the experience with "energy and verve and anticipation," but we have no details of the program and its subsequent impact on his life.

Reading Kotlowitz is an emotional experience. One cannot help but become enamored of the people, impressed by their resilience, embarrassed by their plight in this society, and left to wonder what more can be done. The identification the book engenders for these children is remarkable. I have talked to no one who has read the book who did not feel a strong need to hold these boys in their arms, as did I. For anyone whose interest is in schools, certainly we can look at the places where we work and think about the implications of Pharoah and Lafayette's story for them. We know that schools alone cannot solve society's problems. Too many times in our history it has been expected that schools would correct the paths of urban children: help them avoid drugs, deal with the problem of children having children, overcome the malnutrition of poverty, redirect anger wrought of violence and despair, and overcome a culturally impoverished environment. The problems run too deep and are too much within the fabric of the society to be solved through one institution. Teachers in urban schools where we work look at their children and wonder why they fall asleep during school—especially when the lessons are in fact engaging and fast paced. They would rather find socially acceptable explanations—they stayed up too late last night watching a baseball or a basketball game on television or the like. We can live with those explanations and go on to try to make a difference. The truth may be that they can't sleep because of broken pipes, because of fear, because of gunshots, or because of unthinkable involvement in the drug culture. Those reasons are harder to deal with, but the need to try to make a difference is even more compelling. Schools remain the most accessible institution in the urban setting, and so it is likely that they will continue to be a major focus as the vehicle to help improve lives. Even Kotlowitz's own intervention with these children is primarily an effort to place them in different, presumably better, schools. Still, there are other social institutions that have significant impact on lives

in cities. We do get a glimpse of some of these, and while we cannot deal with all the possibilities in this review, there are important points at which colleges might become involved in urban problems. Two institutions discussed by Kotlowitz are the prisons and the welfare system. The prisons, seen through the eyes of Terence, La Joe's son, and the others who visit him, are dehumanizing places with little evidence of any efforts to help prepare those imprisoned for a new life. We don't hear of any skills programs, educational programs, or programs designed to open alternatives for these individuals. When we see the welfare system, it is a heartless, frightening, bureaucratic structure that takes away the lifeline for those who depend on it, sometimes with little reason. In La Joe's case, an article published by Kotlowitz suggested that her husband occasionally stayed at the apartment, even though he seldom did and provided no support. An investigation led to the temporary suspension of the minimal support on which the family depended.

Kozol tells us of the savage inequalities that stand in the path of schools making a difference for kids in Chicago, in East St. Louis, in New York, in Camden and Paterson, New Jersey, in Detroit, in Washington, D.C., and in San Antonio. For more than two hundred pages we encounter case after case of fiscal inequality and of legal efforts to correct the disparity. Schools in old ice rinks, schools without heat, schools with no books or maps or even teachers, schools without athletic facilities, schools with sewer water running through the kitchen, schools where more than half the students drop out before graduation. It seems endless. Cumulatively, the effect is devastating. One can hardly tell one setting from another. To emphasize the degree of deprivation, we frequently are exposed to the best suburban schools, often only a few miles from the urban settings. It is clear that when society has given up on people, even—or maybe especially—the promise of public education as a means of preparation for meaningful and direct participation in the larger society is denied. In Chicago in 1988–89, years about which Kotlowitz writes, we learn that the average per-pupil expenditure—one of the important measures of quality of schools—was $5,265 per child while in nearby suburban districts $7,000, $8,000, and even $9,000 per child was spent. In Camden, the expenditure in the same year was $3,538 while in Princeton it was $7,725.

The real thrust of Kozol's work on inequality is on the resources. One concludes from his accounts that we have belied both *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which found in 1896 that separate schools were constitutionally acceptable so long as they were equal, and *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka*, which found in 1954 that segregation itself was unconstitutional. Kozol finds not only segregated schools, but unequal segregated schools. Of course, it is not just the schools that are segregated. It is the communities themselves, a fact that grows out of complex factors of employment, zoning, white flight, and discrimination. Kozol charges that due to recent administrations in Washington, "social policy [in public schooling] has been turned back almost one hundred years."

The descriptions of the evolution and bases for funding inequities, while their origins are reviewed more superficially than the effects of the inequality, are instructive. We learn, for example, that many urban areas

have so many tax exempt institutions that 30 percent or more of the property is off the tax rolls. Especially disturbing, we find that in East St. Louis, large chemical companies clearly within the geographic boundaries of the community have managed to establish separate legal entities to which low taxes are paid but that do not enrich impoverished nearby schools.

The history of the last decade—the history of trying to deal with the problems of urban schools by trying to affect the funding patterns—is a history of failure. Every effort to deal with the problem, it would seem, has been turned back one way or another. In Detroit and Texas, the efforts for establishing equitable funding have not been supported by the courts. In New Jersey, a promising decision seems to have been overturned by the political will of the people. In that instance, the court found in the case of *Abbot v. Burke* that school funding in New Jersey was indeed discriminatory. Anticipating the outcome, Governor Jim Florio's administration succeeded in securing passage of the "Quality Education Act," intended in part to overcome the disparity, and, through new taxes, add some new money to education. When it became clear that some wealthier school districts would lose funding to children in Newark and Camden, the political outcry was so strong that, before it was even put in place, the bill was amended to minimize the redistribution. Subsequently, in November of 1991, the citizens of New Jersey swept in a legislature dominated by the opposition party, which claims a mandate to reconsider both the Quality Education Act and the taxes that funded it. Confronting inequality is obviously not a popular pastime. One wonders if it might have been different if everyone involved had spent some time with Lafayette and Pharoah.

But what if schools had more resources? Kozol does not give us enough of a flavor of life in these underfunded schools to have a real sense of what must be changed. More insight into the interactions within the classrooms, offices, and hallways, rather than an emphasis on the schools' limited resources, would have perhaps given a better sense of disparity's effects. Some of the scenes in the schools Kozol takes us to, however, cannot help but convey the degree to which these places have the potential to remove hope and to dehumanize, not unlike the prisons in Chicago. One young man in East St. Louis, who has concluded that Martin Luther King died in vain, urges Kozol to visit the bathrooms. He reports, "Four of the six toilets do not work. The toilet stalls, which are eaten away by red and brown corrosion, have no doors. The toilets have no seats. One has a rotted wooden stump. There are no paper towels and no soap. Near the door there is a loop of wire with an empty toilet-paper roll." Kids must notice that, even in this most personal and basic area, with implications for cleanliness and health, self-worth, and privacy, whoever equipped the schools didn't really care. The title, *Savage Inequalities*, may have many meanings. Certainly it can, and does, mean that the inequalities in these schools are savage. It also means that the segment of society that permits schools like these to exist is itself savage. Does it also reflect how society views these children in schools, perhaps as savages who don't deserve more? Have we given up on the democratic principles underlying equal opportunity?

And so, in light of Kozol and Kotlowitz, what can the colleges do? Given the fiscal difficulties faced in most institutions of higher education, and the clear message from the voters in many states suggesting an unwillingness to suffer any personal pain in seeking a solution, one can hear the choruses across the campus saying, "It's not our problem. We don't deal with public schools—only those fools in colleges of education do that. Our college has nothing to do with preparing teachers." Furthermore, we often hear grousing in universities about the quality of their own students, and it is much easier and self-satisfying to blame the schools, teachers, and teacher educators rather than roll up our sleeves and really get involved. And so, why should we? Assuming that we should, maybe an even harder question is, "What can we do?"

At least three reasons why colleges and universities must make a commitment to these problems were suggested earlier. The problems are tearing at the fabric of society, and, since universities are institutions in that society, the problems have affected and will affect higher education. Second, there is an implicit moral obligation, as institutions responsible for the intellectual well-being of society, to bring to bear those intellectual strengths on society's most pressing problems. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these are real people, and we cannot turn our backs on them.

What can we do? First, the culture of the university must begin to change along the lines suggested in Ernest Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered* so that service of a meaningful kind—especially when it adds to our knowledge and understanding of the society—counts within the reward structure of our institutions. The absence of that condition has not prevented caring faculty from becoming involved in important social issues. Again, our social scientists must turn to the problems of employment, the drug culture, equal rights, housing, and the like. It is necessary that actions along these lines become the coin of the realm especially for our young and soon-to-be hired faculty. Changing expectations so that faculty are encouraged to become active by changing the reward structure will be a difficult step. It will be difficult because the changes involve altering deep-seated, traditional status issues related to various kinds of scholarly/service activities. But the time to make the changes in the reward structure was never better than it is now. With the likelihood of massive retirements, new members of the college community could become involved in efforts that will lead to real improvements in society.

This fundamental change in our expectations for faculty is necessary because we need far broader involvement, and in fact we need to make such involvement the expected behavior of faculty, especially for those institutions fortunate enough to be in proximity to an urban center. The involvement needs to be from faculty across the institution. In addition to faculty in such departments as sociology helping to intervene in the drug culture, the welfare system, and criminal justice system, we need anthropologists and others to help us understand the values that operate in the subcultures that are destructive in cities. We need artists, writers, and dramatists to involve us in these conflicting values and to help reshape the aesthetics of the city. In addition to environmental scientists who can help document the need for improvements in the quality of the physical environment, we need technologists to help preserve some of the

historic beauty that is lost each year to decay. We need faculty from schools of business administration to work with small businesses to help ensure their success so that employment opportunities are maintained and increased. We need all faculty to consider how their own professional interests interact with the needs and interests of those taking leadership roles in improving the quality of life in our cities.

Aside from the current reward structure in our colleges, other factors work against this kind of involvement. One is the fear that outside expertise is not wanted in our urban centers. Given the response I have seen to those faculty who seek to work in the schools—an overwhelmingly positive, welcoming response—I believe that our faculty will be welcomed in their efforts; but there are indeed some risks to go along with the enormous promise. The risks have to do with putting ourselves on the line. College faculty are viewed in this society as being theorists with esoteric interests that have little to do with reality. It is likely that we will confront prejudices along these lines and expectations that this stereotype is true. We must be willing to show that we can make a difference in the real world. The benefits of success in such involvement include not only the obvious satisfaction from helping solve this destructive set of problems, but also the possibility of increasing public support for our work. With something like three-quarters of the citizenry never having graduated from college, it is amazing that they understand what we do well enough to furnish us with the kind of support we have had. Imagine the support if a national effort to solve some of these pervasive problems has some success.

Second, the easiest point of access into the urban culture is through the schools, while the schools themselves can and must do more even before the resources they need to achieve parity are available. One promising model to be explored is the professional development school established in a real partnership with an institution of higher education. Such schools usually have three characteristics: they are model schools, they are places where future teachers study, and they are places where practicing teachers learn new strategies. In making them model schools, the expertise of the entire college community is needed. Partnerships to foster these schools must be university-wide, with presidents and provosts at the lead. Arts and science faculty, education faculty, and others must join in true partnership to make them work. There are examples of successes. But we must care enough to take real risks to make the idea work.

Third, there is teacher education. The potential for what John Goodlad has called the simultaneous renewal of schools and teacher education is very real. For one thing, there will be enormous turnover in the teaching force within the next decade, but what will the new teachers we prepare look like? We need now to undertake a renewal of our teacher education programs along the lines Goodlad suggests in *Teachers for Our Nation's Schools* (Jossey Bass: San Francisco, 1990). We must be certain that those responsible for the education of educators understand what is possible for schools in a political democracy. We must be sure that we haven't given up, and that we know what real change is possible. Next, teacher education must become a university-wide responsibility. The bulk of the education

of all new teachers is in the hands of our arts and science faculty. The quality of that instruction is critical. It must be instruction that leads to and models critical thinking and problem solving that, as Goodlad suggests, enables students to enter the human conversation. We need to overcome the "prestige deprivation" endemic in teacher education. The elitist perspective that dismisses the importance of teacher education, along with teaching and teachers, seems to grow from deep disrespect for the schools in which our students are educated, and extends to denigrating the choice to become a teacher, especially when it is made by our best students. We need to prepare teachers to be stewards of the schools, as Goodlad says. Good teachers cannot quietly accept the inequality that surrounds them. They need to understand what is possible in schools, to speak out, to seize control. Here too there is a clear, direct role for college faculty. We have the perspective that can help teachers understand the inequalities that surround them and that become so pervasive as to be invisible.

Many urban teachers have limited perspectives, their reference point for excellence often being the schools their own children attend. To truly become a steward of the best practices, our teachers need to broaden their perspectives, a process in which college faculty can be enormously helpful. In Kozol's work, a courageous high school English teacher in Paterson, New Jersey, Alfred Weiss, speaks out about the substitution of basic skills for literature, about the incongruity of a principal with a bull horn, about the failure of the bureaucrats to meet the real needs of students. Al Weiss speaks as a steward of the school in which he works, but we need many, many more like him, and we need to support his efforts in every way possible.

But renewing teacher education, important as that is, is not enough to renew urban schools, because so few of our best graduates in teacher education seek to work in those schools. A two-pronged approach is needed. On the one hand, we need to dramatically increase the number of minority students in our teacher education programs, not only because their historic absence speaks to discrimination, but because the role models they represent are critically needed in urban schools. On the other hand, we need to provide positive urban experiences for our majority teacher education students so they can make an informed choice about teaching in an urban school, not one as distant from reality as the fears of the commuters riding from downtown Chicago past Lafayette and Pharoah.

Taken together, Kotlowitz and Kozol leave the reader exhausted, depressed, disgusted, but, hopefully, more ready to take responsibility and action than ever before.