Jonathan Kozol

The author describes the savage inequalities existing in public education in contemporatry America. He calls for greater involvement of metropolitan universities in providing a more inclusive preparation for teachers, and helping to redefine their role as children's advocates.

Public Education, Public Policy, and Metropolitan Universities

I would like to begin very briefly by telling you how I made my own personal journey out of academic life into an involvement with poor children. I never intended to become a teacher. I went to Harvard and had a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford and then spent a couple of years in Paris. I came back to the United States in 1964. I was feeling a little panicky: I was 26 by then, and yet I did not know what I was going to do in life. I was tempted to go back to Harvard and maybe go to law school, medical school, do something reputable. And then in the spring of '64, thousands of American college kids started to go down to Mississippi for the summer, which would come to be known as Freedom Summer. The forerunners were those three young men, Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman, one black and two white, who went into Mississippi and disappeared. A few months later their bodies were found buried in the mud in Philadelphia, Mississippi, murdered by the Ku Klux Klan.

That had a stunning effect upon me. Without thinking, without reflection of any kind, I got on the subway at Harvard Square and went to the end of the line, which was Roxbury. Roxbury is the black ghetto of Boston. I had grown up in Boston, but I never had been in a black community. Now I became a teacher in the Boston Public Schools and was assigned to teach fourth grade children in a segregated school in Roxbury. It was an extraordinary ex-

perience. Nothing in my life had prepared me for it. The 35 or 36 kids that I was assigned to teach had already had 12 teachers that year before I was put into the classroom. I was their 13th teacher. And I wasn't certified; I was technically a permanent substitute teacher. Most of the kids had never had a real teacher since they had been in kindergarten, but only an endless string of substitute teachers all those years. Yet they weren't angry. I wished they had been angry. Instead they were just passive and depleted, looking down at the floor. I remember one girl who sat in the back row, a beautiful girl, taller than the other kids. Serenely cold and distanced and bitter. She alone out of all of that class seemed to understand that they had been destroyed, and she alone realized that it wasn't their fault. I will never forget the cold hatred in which she looked at me. She never smiled, and would never open up.

I was frustrated by the awful textbooks that we had to use. I wanted to bring some fresh air into the classroom, so at the end of the spring one day, I went in to a bookstore and just grabbed some brand new poetry books off of the shelf: Langston Hughes, Robert Frost. I brought them into school and I will never forget what happened. When I held that Langston Hughes book in my hand, the kids, they were almost all black kids, suddenly they all sitting up in their chairs. There was an electric atmosphere in the room, they were staring at the back of the book where there was a photograph of the poet: Langston Hughes, a strikingly handsome man, he looked like Denzel Washington, the movie star. The kids were just staring at that and then at me and then at the book. As though there were a mistake. I realized that they had never seen a book by a black author since they had entered school.

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I read a poem to the kids, the one that contains the beautiful line where the poet asks: "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?" When I read that you could have heard a pin drop in that room. It was just amazing, this electric feeling, this strange silence in the room. I had never witnessed anything like that since I had been in the school. And in that silence, that girl in the back row, the one who was so bitter, the one who had that icy look of unforgiven anger in her eyes, the one who would never show any emotion except coldness, got up out of her chair and started to cry in front of all of the other kids. And she came up to the front of the room and ever so gently grazed my shoulder with her hand and said, very softly, "Thank you". No prize that I had ever won mattered to me as much as that little girl's tears. That was the most extraordinary thing in my life. And she asked if she could bring the book home and show it to her mother. I said, "Sure you can." The next day she came in early and asked if she could speak to the class before we started. I said yes. She got up and she recited the whole poem which she had memorized the night before, three long pages.

And the next day I was fired from the Boston Public Schools for reading that poem. They also got me for reading a Robert Frost poem because it too was not on the list that they had prepared of what you

can read at each grade level. The poem was called "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening"—hardly a radical poem. An NAACP leader in Boston later said "probably the whitest poem ever written." But it was not on the list, and I was out on a charge of "curriculum deviation."

The following year I was hired to teach at a wonderful school in one of the richest suburbs outside of Boston—an almost all-white suburb. And now I understood what good education could be in America. Suddenly, instead of thirty-five kids, I had just nineteen children in my class. Instead of a crowded, dirty little room, we had a big, lovely room with everything a teacher could dream of. Instead of a little space of cracked cement out in back that had to pass for a playground in Boston, we had a real playground and playing fields, and lawns, and baseball fields, jungle gyms, and swings out in back of the school. And now I had a wonderful, humane principal who adored children and didn't believe in basal readers. She said they were too predictive. She said they insult children and they insult teachers. She's right. She said, "Here's a thousand dollars. Just go out and buy anything you want." I got a whole lot of wonderful paperback novels and we did real literature that year. It was wonderful. And for that job that was so easy and so much fun—pure heaven—I was paid $4,000 more than I had been paid for teaching in Boston.

That was my first experience of the savage inequalities of education in America. I wasn't political until that moment, but I became a political advocate that year and I have been ever since. A lot of people nowadays in Washington, they'll say to me, "Jonathan, don't you think educators are getting too political?" "Shouldn't teachers stick to their lesson plans and keep out of politics?" I don't think we are nearly political enough. I tell teachers that all the time. I'm going to come back to this.

Four years ago, I decided to go back and look at schools all over the United States. I visited urban, rural, and suburban schools. I wish I could be optimistic today and tell you that I found dramatic differences from a quarter century ago, but it simply wouldn't be the truth. Public schools in most of the United States are still separate and still unequal. And in most of the country, to be quite honest, they are more separate, more segregated, and less equal than they were when I started out. Some of the dramatic exceptions are where you would least expect them: in Mississippi, and in other places in the South. The most segregated schools in America today are in New York City.

There have been all sorts of mechanistic and structural transformations in the schools. You'll hear of site-based ghetto schools, of restructured ghetto schools—and of ghetto schools with ghetto choices for the ghetto children. Of ghetto schools with greater input from the ghetto parents, and of ghetto schools with ghetto partnerships with ghetto banks. But the fact of the ghetto as a permanent disfigurement upon the horizon of American democracy today goes virtually unquestioned.

Let me take you on a quick journey. We begin in the South Bronx, New York City, one of the poorest congressional districts in America. Senator Bill Bradley says the life expectancy there is lower than it is in Bangladesh. Go into Morris High School, a big old high school in the Bronx, with all black or Latino kids: you just don't see any white kids in these schools. Total apartheid—that's what it is. On a rainy day, the

main stairwell is roped off because of the waterfall. That one school needs fifty million dollars in repairs according to the principal. New York City doesn't have that money today. Go into the counseling office, see six girls sitting there and next to them a big blue barrel half-full of rain. Rain is pouring in through the ceiling. I asked the guidance counselor, "How do the kids react to this?" She says, with a sigh, "They'd just like it to stop raining in their school."

An elementary school in the same neighborhood, thirteen hundred little kids, all black and Hispanic, sometimes one or two Asian kids, thirteen hundred kids, packed like sardines into a building that is certified for maybe half that number of kids. It's not even a school building. It's an old roller skating rink without any windows, no ventilation. I asked the principal if I could see a kindergarten and she said "You can see all the kindergartens. They're all in one room. We have no space." All four kindergartens are packed into one room. In the corner of the same room there is a sixth grade of thirty-eight Puerto Rican kids trying to learn English—trying to be heard above the din of the four kindergartens.

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Usually when I have published my books over this quarter century, the critics said that I have probably overstated. No one said that this time. Indeed, since this book was published, the major papers in New York have reported that the conditions in some cases were significantly worse than anything I said. Last fall when school began, the press in New York reported that hundreds of classes started the year with forty-five, fifty-five, in some cases, sixty children with one teacher. In one high school in Brooklyn, there were classes with seventy kids. The problem gets solved, a black principal said in despair, when half these kids drop out by Christmas.

I've met a lot of wonderful school superintendents around America. It's a heroic job, especially for black and Latino superintendents because we never made them superintendents of inner city schools until the systems were bankrupt. Then we put in people of color to run the system and we expect them to work miracles. And of course they can't. What they have to do, in fact, is to mediate injustice.

Chicago school administrators told me that on any average day a quarter of all their teachers are substitute teachers, because they do not pay enough or create sufficiently dignified conditions to attract qualified teachers into the classrooms. In the spring it gets worse. On a typical Monday in May when a lot of teachers are demoralized and don't show up, almost twenty thousand kids in Chicago come to class and find no teacher at all, not even a sub. No adult at all. Principals send them into the gym and have custodians sit with them. There is nothing else they can do.

I remember visiting a kindergarten in Camden, New Jersey, which is the fourth poorest small city in America, almost all black and Hispanic, and that city is so poor. People in Camden care a lot about their education. They have almost the highest property tax in all of New Jersey. But property is worthless in Camden. So even with their very high tax rate,

they can pull in very little money for their children's schools. And even with the state assistance and a pittance of federal money, they are able to spend only about $4,000 per pupil in Camden, which is very low. Get in your car and drive two hours north to Princeton, New Jersey, and there, with a lower tax rate but houses that are often worth a million dollars each, they were spending exactly twice as much, $8,000 per pupil. Same state, two hours away. Get in your car again, drive another two hours north into New York State, and go to Great Neck, a beautiful suburb outside New York City. A lot of homes there are worth $4 million. And there, at the time I wrote my book, they were spending $16,000 per pupil. $16,000 in Great Neck, $8,000 in Princeton, $4,000 in Camden.

They are all American children, whether they live in Great Neck, Princeton, or Camden. They say the pledge to the same flag every morning, with their hands over their hearts, swear a pledge of absolute allegiance to one nation indivisible. And I always thought there was irony in that. It's not indivisible. It's skillfully divided. If you are standing there in kindergarten in Camden and look at these little kids in their crowded kindergartens, you ought to be hopeful. You ought to say to yourself, "They are babies. They have the whole world in front of them. They can do anything they want. Their lives stretch out before them." But if you know the odds, if you know the statistics, if you know the numbers, and if you know the dollars, you look at those kids and you say to yourself with bitterness, "I get it. In the eyes of America, I'm looking at little children in this room worth $4,000 each. If I want to see some $8,000 kids, I'll have to go to Princeton. And if I want to see some kids that America really values, I'll have to go to Great Neck." This is absolute evil. A just society would not permit this, and it must be changed. You could draw the same examples in any state in America, the same comparisons.

Some of the rich people I know who live in places like Great Neck always start out by agreeing with me. They will say "Of course, this is unfair." One person said to me, "It's obviously unfair. We wouldn't play little league baseball this way. Why do we do it in our public schools?" I thought that was a good question. But then, if they are business types, they usually move into a harder mode very quickly, and the next question is something like this: "How do we know that greater investment will necessarily improve results?" "How do we know that pouring more money into these slum schools is going to make any difference?" Sometimes they will say, "Is there any data to prove that money can buy success in school?" "Equal funding," they say, "may not result in equal achievement." Whenever I am asked that, and I hear it a lot, I give the answer that the Supreme Court of New Jersey gave a couple of years ago when it found the method of funding the school system of New Jersey unconstitutional. "If money," said the Court, "does not guarantee success in education, then the poor have an equal right with the rich to be disappointed by that discovery." It was a very good answer.

That is a terrible and bitter reality for young people

There is, of course, a special poignancy in addressing inequality in Texas where the courts have been debating this intensely heated issue for a long, long time. The famous Texas school equity case didn't begin

in 1988 or 1990. It was filed in 1968, a quarter century ago. The lead plaintiff was a poor man named Dimitrio Rodriguez who had children in the Edgewood district in San Antonio. A poor man suing for equality for his children. By the time the case was won, about five years ago, all of Rodriguez's children had completed school. It was too late for them. "I cried this morning," he said the day that the decision came down from the courts, "because this is something that has been in my heart. My children will not benefit. Twenty-one years is a long time to wait." I met him recently. Now, he says, his grandchildren are finishing school, and the legislature still has not acted.

Similarly, the same type of case in New Jersey, filed more than a decade ago, wasn't decided until 1988. That is a terrible and bitter reality for young people who are told to believe in the processes of the law. What good is a legal decision if it comes when your childhood is over? "It took a judge seven years and six hundred pages," said the *Philadelphia Enquirer*, "to explain why children in poor neighborhoods deserve the same decent education as kids in rich suburbs. But the learning-disabled Camden boy who was lead plaintiff in the case will have a hard time reading the decision. He is today a high school dropout with the reading skills of a child. During the years he was in school, Camden lacked the funds to offer science, music, art, physical education, or learning-disabled programs. On the day the decision came down from the court, he heard the news of his belated vindication from a small cell in the Camden County Jail. He is a cocaine addict. Except for an occasional letter written in a childish scrawl, his mother says she never hears from him. 'I was prepared for a long fight,' his mother says, 'but not for seven years.'"

Let me be candid with you. The universities by and large have given no support to those who brought these cases. Whether in Texas or New Jersey or any other state, the academic leaders tend to sympathize deeply with the poor school districts, but they do not see it as a part of their accepted mandate to participate as active partisans on the behalf of those poor children whom, too often, they will never know, because those children will have dropped out, died, landed in prison, or in the modern prison of the welfare system, long before the time when they might otherwise have gotten into college. If the universities with their humane tradition will not fight for our society's most vulnerable children, to whom then can these children turn for mercy? I don't know.

Finally, I thought for a long time of what I wanted to leave with you as leaders of metropolitan universities. To me, the most important role a university could fill would be to educate a very different kind of school professional: A different kind of teacher, a different kind of school administrator. Someone who is far more intimately familiar with the ethical and social problems that confront our schools today. One who has the personal characteristics that empower educators to assume the role of advocates for children and for the neighborhoods in which they work. I am a teacher, and I am a friend of teachers. I don't like to bash teachers or stereotype them. I know a lot of wonderful teachers. But I am concerned that teachers have been ill-equipped for the colossal challenges they face in working with poor children, especially with black children and Latino children. And I'm even more concerned by their too

frequent inability to cross the emotional line between the worlds of poverty and power. To the degree that teachers are prepared in universities to grope with inner city needs, it tends to be done by means of fairly dry and dreary courses of a rather token nature, like a one semester course in multicultural education. They do not get any vivid exploration of injustices inflicted on poor children, any passionate exposure to the powerful black and Latino advocates and authors of our age, any deep immersion in the sociology of race and the politics of penury and power. Too frequently they come out of their education courses and go into classrooms as mechanical technicians, but people who are politically denuded, emotionally blanched, intellectually impoverished.

To be quite honest, an awful lot of the teachers that I meet are trained rather than educated. This is an old problem in the United States, of course. It goes way back. I think of my first exposure to classroom teachers in Boston years ago. I remember my most vivid impression had nothing to do with racism or anything like that. It was just how glazed they seemed to be—glazed when parents came up to school for PTA meetings, for example. The teachers seemed as though they were frozen in some way, surrounded by a kind of a professional plastic. And of course the parents weren't responsive to the teachers because of that.

I found it so frustrating that, in order to break out of it, I did something quite unprofessional. I started going on Friday nights to visit the kids in my class with my girlfriend. Like any other poor teacher in the 1960s, I had a little tiny VW bug, plastered no doubt with peace signs and things. We would time our visit on purpose for supper time: I wasn't getting paid much that year. Parents would be so startled. Panic almost would set in because no teacher had ever been there before. The kid would yell upstairs, "It's a teacher." We would go in and the mother or father would say, "Have you had dinner yet?" We had this planned. We would say, "Yeah, we're going out to dinner." They would say, "No, you're not. We've got plenty." Even the poorest family would put more food on the table and insist that we stay for dinner. It was a wonderful experience. Very gently they'd say, "Do you take a drink?" You know, as though teachers maybe didn't drink. Maybe that wasn't professional. We did that every week. We got to know almost every parent in the class.

The principal heard about this, and called me into her office. She said, "Mr. Kozol, I understand you have been visiting the families in the neighborhood." I said "Yes." She said "It isn't very professional to do that." I hadn't studied to be a teacher, so I didn't know that word. She said "It's unwise to let them get to know you that way." So I said, "What way, eating?" She said, "Let them come up to you. Don't you go down to them." That was an extraordinary statement. Our school was on a hill as it happened. Professional seemed to be equated with impersonal, de-energized, politically de-sexed, emotionally neutered, antiseptic. That was the feeling I got. I used to think how sad it was that parents and kids would never know what interesting human beings some of these teachers really were. But most of all, I felt heart broken to observe how scared these teachers seemed to be to become the ardent friends and allies of the poor they were assigned to teach. Their reluctance obviously limited their effectiveness as teachers. But, more important, it impoverished them as human beings.

I notice the same thing today. I am trying to be careful because I know a lot of wonderful teachers in America. Classroom teachers are among the most heroic people of our times in my belief. They, to a large degree, are carrying the flag for democracy these days and entering battles that too few people in our society have the moral stamina to face, but they are being sent unarmed into that battle. They are being victimized by an archaic and encrusted notion of professional preparation. They know their lesson plans. They know the fashionable jargon and the new buzz words every year. But it's brittle, and it isn't enough. A lot of universities add one token course about the special needs of at-risk children or something of that sort. These courses are too rigidified and, frankly, they often have a pacifier function.

Teachers need political science. They need real literature courses, not English for English teachers—real English literature. If they are teaching in Texas or California they need to be fluent Spanish speakers. They need philosophy courses. They need psychology courses—real psychology, not watered down ed psych. In other words, they need the rich, demanding scholarly and poetic preparation that we look for in the most respected members of our society. And instead of being scraped down to this bare bones plaster figurine we term "professional," they need to be as interesting and eloquent as JFK or Barbara Jordan. As human and humorous and fascinating as Ann Richards. She is very humorous. Or Bill Cosby. As gutsy and risk-taking and prophetic as Sojourner Truth or Dr. King. And that's what's missing today. The teachers obviously cannot be universally charismatic, but colleges and universities could do a lot more to make such characteristics far more common and to make it clear that they are valued qualities in teachers, not something to be feared.

Classroom teachers are among the most heroic people of our times

On a broader level, they could do a lot in areas of public policy to redefine the very notion of a teacher, or a principal, or a school official into that of a social activist and change agent and advocate for children. It's amazing to me how seldom teachers that I meet here in Texas have ever even heard about the Edgewood case. Or about Dimitrio Rodriguez. I spoke to about 3,000 of the teachers of Texas last winter, the local affiliate of the NEA, and didn't find more than five or ten who had ever heard of this case. There ought to be a whole course on the dual education system, separate and unequal, of the state of Texas. That ought to be taught to everybody who is going to be a teacher in this state. If they don't understand these things and care about these things, how can they pretend to be the allies of poor children? And, more important, why should those children trust them or be willing to learn from them?

That's one of the very small changes I would make if I were the president of a university. Then I'd go on to bigger things. That would be just the beginning. I would probably be fired quickly, but I would give it a good try.

Note:

This article is based on the transcript of a presentation by the author at the Second National Conference on Metropolitan Universities held at the University of North Texas, Denton, Texas, in March 1993.

Suggested Reading

Hacker, Andrew, *Two Nations*. New York, Scribner's and Sons, 1992.
Kozol, Jonathan, *Death at an Early Age*. New York, Crown Publishers, 1967.
Kozol, Jonathan, *Rachel and Her Children*. New York, Crown Publishers, 1988.
Kozol, Jonathan, *The Night is Dark, and I am a Long Way from Home*. New York, Touchstone Press, 1990.
Kozol, Jonathan, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. New York, Crown Publishers, 1992.
West, Cornel, *Race Matters*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1993.