

ON SAVAGE INEQUALITIES: A CONVERSATION WITH JONATHAN KOZOL

Interview with Marge Scherer
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Have you read *Savage Inequalities*? It's a question that comes up at most educational conferences these days. The best-selling book by Jonathan Kozol has touched many of the nation's educators and riled others, including some notable politicians. In it, he compares rich and poor schools located within a few miles of one another. The stark contrasts of physical surroundings and learning environments--in cities and states from St. Louis to Detroit, New Jersey to Texas--bring home a startling realization of just how different school can be for poor and minority-race children as opposed to middle-class and white children. In this interview with *Educational Leadership*, Kozol, a public school advocate since his early teaching days, describes the conditions that face our nation's urban students and suggests what we can do to eradicate the inequities.

Q: In *Savage Inequalities*, you describe East St. Louis as the saddest place in the world. For the benefit of those who haven't read your book, would you please describe the conditions that you found there?

A: Well, when I visited there a couple of years ago, East St. Louis was the poorest small city in America, virtually 100 percent black, a monument to apartheid in America. The city was so poor, there had been no garbage pickup for four years. There were heaps of garbage in the backyards of children's homes and thousands of abandoned automobile tires in empty lots.

On the edge of the city is a large chemical plant, Monsanto. There is also a very large toxic waste incinerator, as well as a huge sewage treatment plant. If you go there at night you see this orange-brownish smoke belching out of the smokestacks descending on the city. The soil is so toxic with mercury, lead, and zinc, as well as arsenic from the factories, that the city has one of the highest rates of infant mortality in Illinois, the highest rate of fetal death, and also a very high rate of childhood asthma.

The schools, not surprisingly, are utterly impoverished. East St. Louis High School, one of the two schools I visited, had a faint smell of water rot and

sewage because not long before I visited, the entire school system had been shut down after being flooded with sewage from the city's antiquated sewage system. The physics teacher had no water in his physics lab--I remember that vividly. I was certainly stunned by that. In a city poisoned by several chemical plants, the science labs had very few chemicals. It was a scene of utter destitution.

I did meet several wonderful teachers in the school, and I thought the principal of the school was excellent. The superintendent of East St. Louis is also a very impressive person. In a sense, that sort of sums up the situation in many cities where I find great teachers and often very courageous administrators struggling against formidable odds, and then finding themselves condemned by venomous politicians in Washington for failing to promote excellence.

Q: You say that a primary reason that such conditions exist in public schools is inequitable funding. What kind of funding do you think would rectify the shocking conditions in the poorest schools? Are taxes too low? Are Americans not spending enough for public education?

A: East St. Louis, like many poor cities in America, taxes itself at a very high rate. It's one of the most heavily taxed school districts in Illinois. In New Jersey, its counterpart is Camden. Camden has almost the highest property tax rate in New Jersey. But in both cases, because the property is virtually worthless, even with a high property tax, they cannot provide adequate revenues for their schools.

What we ought to do ultimately is get rid of the property tax completely as the primary means of funding public education, because it is inherently unjust. To use the local property tax as even a portion of school funding is unjust because it will always benefit the children of the most privileged people. The present system guarantees that those who can buy a \$1 million home in an affluent suburb will also be able to provide their children with superior schools. That is a persistent betrayal of the whole idea of equal opportunity in America. It's a betrayal of democracy.

We ought to finance the education of every child in America equitably, with adjustments made only for the greater or lesser needs of certain children. And that funding should all come from the collective wealth of our society, mainly from a steeply graduated progressive income tax.

Q: Don't you think that financially able parents will always want to pay extra for the education of their children?

A: Oh, sure. And if rich parents are afraid to let their children compete on

an equal playing field, that's their right. But they ought to know what they're doing. They ought to recognize that they are protecting their children against democracy. And if they want to do that, they have a perfect right. They can pay \$20,000 and send their kids to prep school. But they should not have that right within the public school system.

Even very conservative businessmen out in rich suburbs have in weak moments looked at me and said, "Well, you're right, we would never play Little League baseball this way." They wouldn't dream of sending their kids out with baseball mitts to play ball against a team that had to field the ball with bare hands. They'd regard that as being without honor. I say to them, "It's interesting. You wouldn't play baseball that way but you run the school system that way."

Q: A point that you make very clearly in your book is that the foundation program for schools provides a level of subsistence--a minimum, or basic education, but not an education on the level found in the rich or middle-class districts. What we have is not equal funding, but an equal minimum, and the rest of the funding is decided at the local level. You're saying that there's something very wrong with that?

A: There are several things wrong with that. First of all, you guarantee every district--let's say, hypothetically, a basic minimum of \$4,000. Then let's say a district that has enormous local wealth adds on another \$4,000. That immediately invalidates the minimum \$4,000 guarantee to the poor district because as soon as you double per-pupil spending, you raise the stakes. Now the rich district can steal away any teacher it wants. Many affluent people look at me and say, "Are you seriously telling us that if we want to spend more, we can't?" And I say: "That's right. Not in the public system. It isn't fair."

Q: Do you think that public schools are being abandoned today? For example, there are funding caps, arguments for vouchers for private schools, and efforts to create business-operated schools. Is support for public schools eroding?

A: Absolutely. It's all part of the drive for privatizing the public sphere in the United States. It's a radical movement and it's very powerful. And it's not just in public education. It's part of a national pattern. In many big cities nowadays, affluent people vote against the taxes it would take to maintain good public parks and playgrounds. And then they spend the tax money they saved to join private health clubs, which they alone can enjoy. They vote against funds for citywide sanitation but then raise private funds to provide private sanitation simply for their exclusive neighborhood. They vote against taxation to increase citywide police protection and then hire expensive

private security for their condominium. It's part of a pattern. The proposed voucher system is a larger extension of this pattern: cap the money for public schools and pull your own kids out.

Q: And you don't think the voucher system would help poor people in any way?

A: No. Of course not. The voucher system is the most vicious possible device by which to enable affluent people and middle class people to flee the public system and to bring tax money with them into the private sector.

A \$1,000 voucher, or even a \$2,500 voucher, what will that buy a person? Can you buy tuition to Andover or Exeter or any other good prep school for that? Of course not. What can you do with that money? Well, if you're affluent, you could use that money to subsidize Andover tuition. If you're marginal middle class, that might just tip the balance and give you enough to pull off the tuition of a middle-grade private or parochial school. But if you're the poorest of the poor, you can't buy anything with \$1,000. It's a sham to pretend to offer something to the poor when you're really offering a means for the middle class to rescue their children from the taint of the poor. The way I've heard it described is "save the best, and warehouse the rest."

What I find particularly bitter is that so many of the voucher advocates say, "Well, look. If these inner-city public schools were doing a good job, then we wouldn't be talking about vouchers." They say, "Look at these decrepit school buildings in East St. Louis. Look at these schools in Chicago that can't even afford toilet paper. That's why we need vouchers." But this is very cynical because the very same people who say this are the ones who voted for the politicians who starved our schools of adequate finances.

Q: I want to talk about practices that, in addition to equal funding, would improve the odds for low-income children in urban schools. What would make a difference for at-risk students?

A: Well, let me just say parenthetically, while visiting urban schools, I saw some simply terrific teachers, some really wonderful school principals, and some excellent superintendents. But I purposely did not write a book where I highlighted these great exceptions because I've seen terrific exceptions for 25 years, and I don't want to waste my time pretending any longer that terrific exceptions represent a systemic answer to these problems. There are thousands of small victories every day in America, but I've seen too many small victories washed away by larger losses. School principals are always grateful if you write that kind of book, but I just didn't want to do it.

What would make a significant difference? Number 1: We ought to stop fooling around about preschool and do it at last after a quarter century. We ought to be providing full-day Head Start to every low-income child starting at the age of 2 1/2 And make sure that every child gets that for at least two years, every low-income child. That's one thing.

Number 2: I would abolish the property tax as the basic means of funding and replace it, as I said before, by equitable funding for every American child deriving from a single federal source.

Number 3: I would provide an increment in funding for the low-income inner-city and rural schools. I would go even further and provide at least a \$10,000 increment for any really superb, experienced teacher who agrees to teach in the inner city, not for one or two years when they're just out of college and it's sort of fun and exciting, but for a lifetime.

I would enact a one-time federal school reconstruction bill of about \$100 billion to tear down all these decrepit school buildings and put up schools that children wouldn't be ashamed to enter in the morning. I would encourage the present drive for site-based management to increase local school autonomy. I would encourage the decentralization of school systems so that teachers, principals, parents, and sometimes students themselves could have more input into determination of curriculum, for example.

I would like to see a more sweeping decentralization of school administration, but in saying that, I want to be very cautious. I'm not implying that most of our school superintendents are incompetent, and I'm certainly not implying that inefficiency is the major problem in the public school system. There is a lot of inefficiency, but the big issue is abject destitution. It's a lack of enough money.

It's interesting. People will tell you big inner-city school systems are poorly administered and that there's a lot of waste. They never say that about the rich suburban school districts. The reason, of course, is that when you have \$16,000 per pupil as they have in Great Neck, New York, for example, no one will ever know how inefficient you may be because there's plenty of money to waste. The spotlight shines only on the impoverished district.

Q: You mentioned site-based management. Many educators are urging that schools be restructured. They believe that site-based management offers communities a chance to run schools more efficiently. Do you agree?

A: I encourage more site-based management, but to me that's a secondary issue. The fact is that restructuring without addressing the extreme poverty of the inner-city schools--what will it get us? It will give us restructured

destitution. And that's not a very significant gain. If the New York City schools were administered with maximum efficiency, without a single dollar wasted, they would still be separate and unequal schools. They would be more efficient segregated and unequal schools. But that's not a very worthy goal.

Q: Let's talk a riffle bit about curriculum innovations--for instance, the idea of reaching at-risk kids in ways that are usually reserved for the gifted. Teaching algebra to remedial students, for instance. Dissolving the tracking system. What are your opinions about these solutions to problems of inequity?

A: Tracking! When I was a teacher, tracking had been thoroughly discredited. But during the past 12 years, tracking has come back with a vengeance. Virtually every school system I visit, with a few exceptions, is entirely tracked, although they don't use that word anymore. We have these cosmetic phrases like "homogeneous grouping." It's tracking, by whatever name, and I regret that very much. It's not just that tracking damages the children who are doing poorly, but it also damages the children who are doing very well, because, by separating the most successful students--who are often also affluent, white children--we deny them the opportunity to learn something about decency and unselfishness. We deny them the opportunity to learn the virtues of helping other kids. All the wonderful possibilities of peer teaching are swept away when we track our schools as severely as we are doing today.

The other thing, of course, is that tracking is so utterly predictive. The little girl who gets shoved into the low reading group in 2nd grade is very likely to be the child who is urged to take cosmetology instead of algebra in the 8th grade, and most likely to be in vocational courses, not college courses, in the 10th grade, if she hasn't dropped out by then. So, it's cruelly predictive. There's also a racist aspect to tracking. Black children are three times as likely as white children to be tracked into special-needs classes but only half as likely to be put in gifted programs. That's an intolerable statistic in a democracy. It's a shameful statistic. There's no possible way to explain it other than pure racism. It's one of the great, great scandals of American education.

Q: Some say that the real problem is not equity but excellence. What's your reaction to those who say we must not spend money until we know what really works in education?

A: The problem is not that we don't know what works. The problem is that we are not willing to pay the bill to provide the things that work for the poorest children in America. And we have not been willing for many, many

years. After all, if poor black parents on the South Side of Chicago want to know what works, they really don't need a \$2 million grant from Exxon to set up another network of essential schools. All they need to do is take a bus trip out to a high school in Wilmette and see what money pays for. All they need to do is go out and see schools where there are 16 children in a class with one very experienced teacher. All they need to do is visit a school with 200 IBMs; a school where the roof doesn't leak; a school that is surrounded by green lawns, where the architecture and atmosphere of the school entice people to feel welcome; a school in which the prosperity of the school creates the relaxed atmosphere in which the teachers feel free to innovate, which they seldom do under the conditions of filth and desperation.

What I'm saying is rather irreverent, I realize, but this is why I always sigh with weariness when I hear about the newest network of effective, essential, or accelerated schools. I say, I've seen these prototype models come and go for years and they sure do make reputations for the people who sponsor them. Foundations will support them and business partners will get on board so long as it's in fashion. If the issue in America were truly that we don't yet know what works, what arrogance would lead us to believe that we are just now on the verge of finding out?

Q: But critics of our schools are saying that there are schools that have all kinds of equipment and materials and resources but where the academic curriculum isn't very good, where kids aren't learning that much. There are those who say the schools don't need to be fixed for the poor children only; they need to be systematically reformed to benefit all children. What about that argument?

A: I don't subscribe to the fashionable notion these days that all our schools are failing. I don't buy the argument that it isn't just the poor kids, it's all our kids; that suburban kids have it bad, too, and we need to make these changes for everybody. I don't really think that's true. It's a wonderfully consoling notion, because so long as it prevails, we have a perfect justification for postponing any efforts toward equality. After all, if these kids in Great Neck are suffering as much as the kids in the South Bronx, if all our schools are bad, if there's no way of discriminating between lesser and greater forms of injustice, then we can perpetuate the present inequalities for another century. I find that a very disturbing notion.

Certainly, even at a top-rated, highly funded suburban high school, there are a lot of things that I would like to change. There are kids at such schools whose individuality is not adequately respected. There are kids who suffer emotionally or don't get the challenging courses of which they are capable. But let's put things in perspective. These children are not by and large being

destroyed for life. These children by and large are not going to end up in homeless shelters.

When people tell me that the schools in affluent suburbs are not doing the job that they could do, I ask, "Well, what do you mean by that?" Typically, they say, "Well, our daughter, Susan, went to our local school and she was bitterly shortchanged academically. It did her real harm." And, I say, "What harm did it do her? Is she on welfare now?" "NO," they say, "but she's having the devil of a time at Sarah Lawrence."

We've got to distinguish between injustice and inconvenience. Before we deal with an affluent child's existential angst, let's deal with the kid in Chicago who has not had a permanent teacher for the past five years.

It's a funny thing. After I give speeches, people will come up to me and say, "Good job." They seem to like me, but then a moment comes when they step away and I can tell something different is coming. That's the point where the question comes and the question is always the same. They ask, "Can you really solve this kind of problem with money? Is money really the answer?" I always think it's an amazing question. As though it's bizarre to suggest that money would be the solution to poverty. As though it's a bizarre idea that it would really take dollars to put a new roof on Morris High School in the Bronx and get the sewage out of the schools in East St. Louis; that it would take real money to hire and keep good teachers so they would stay for a lifetime in the schools that need them most; that it would take real money to buy computers. But that's what I always hear. They say, "Can you really solve this kind of problem by throwing money at it?" Conservatives love that word throwing. They never speak of throwing money at the Pentagon. We allocate money for the Pentagon. We throw money at anything that has to do with human pain. When they say that to me, I look them right in the eyes and say, "Sure. That's a great way to do it. Throw it. Dump it from a helicopter. Put it in my pocket and I'll bring it to the school myself." I don't know a better way to fix the root problem.

Q: What is it that got you involved in public schools--and fighting injustice?

A: Oh, who knows? My mother read the Bible to me when I was a child. She's a very religious Jewish woman. My father is a physician; he spent much of his life healing poor people. My entire education was in English literature at Harvard and Oxford, and I got into teaching quite by accident. It was the spring of 1964. Three young men were murdered in Mississippi: Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman. I was shaken by that, particularly by the death of Michael Schwerner, since he was from a background very much like mine, middle-class Jewish family from the North. So I got on the train at Harvard Square and went to the end of the line, to Roxbury, the ghetto of

Boston, and signed up to teach a Freedom School, run by the Civil Rights Movement. That was in the summer, and in the fall, I signed up as a teacher in the Boston public schools.

Although I wasn't certified, I was told that if I did not mind teaching black children, I could go into the classroom. That was a quick introduction to American racism. The year ended with my being fired.

Q: Because you tried to teach Robert Frost and Langston Hughes and they weren't in the curriculum?

A: Yes. I was hired a couple of years later to teach in one of the wealthiest suburban school districts outside of Boston. There I saw what good education can be, what wonderful conditions can exist for privileged children. That's when, in a sense, this book that I just published, began. I saw how unfairly our schools are financed and governed. That hasn't changed. It's very much the same today. It's worse in many ways because there are so few political leaders even questioning these inequalities. I might just say parenthetically, the reason I made some critical references before to some of those pedagogic figures who get a lot of money to set up networks of excellent, accelerated, essential, or effective schools, the reason I refer to that with a sense of reservation, is that these people would not get that kind of foundation money if they were speaking candidly about racism and inequality. In order to make their programs palatable, they have substituted an agenda of innovation for an agenda of justice.

Listen, I've been invited to probably 100 conferences on education since this book was published. I've been to conferences on "quality" in education, on "more effective" education, on "excellence in education." I have not been invited to one conference on equality in education. There are no such conferences. And yet that remains the central issue in American education, as it does in American democracy. That troubles me very much. To be honest, I'm surprised this book became a bestseller. I don't know why it did.

Q: Where did you get the title, *Savage Inequalities*?

A: I chose that title because I was sick of powerful people suggesting that there was some kind of essential savagery in poor black children in America. I wanted to make clear that if there is something savage in America, it is in the powerful people who are willing to tolerate these injustices. That's why I chose it. I agree it's a tough title, and some people tried to talk me out of it, but I stuck with it.

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