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The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America.

Jonathan Kozol. New York: Crown Publishers. 2005. Pp. vii + 404.

A Book Review by Gregory P. Glasgow

There is no doubt that in today's competitive, postindustrial global economy, education is a burning issue in the minds of concerned parents worldwide, seeking to empower their children to succeed in life. Achieving this goal in some nations, however, comes easier for some than for others, a fact that Jonathan Kozol clearly laments in his treatise of the perennial racial and socioeconomic inequalities in the American school system today. *The Economist* recently portrayed America's schools as unfair, and mentions that "some unlucky kids get a shoddy education" ("Unequal: the Sequel," p.34) while wealthy children "live in areas with more property taxes, more education spending and better schools. They also tend to be white" (ibid). In *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, Kozol would concur. He does not sugarcoat the issue of such educational inequality at all: in fact, his book is a searing, heart-rending portrait of the current U.S. educational crisis seen from many viewpoints. These include leaders and researchers closely following the dilemma, the teachers and administrators who struggle to motivate their disillusioned pupils from charred, decaying and hostile school environments, and the low-income, disproportionately minority children themselves, who face the daily reality of having to learn in such severe contexts.

After a gripping introduction, which gives the reader a retrospective look on how events in the civil rights era prompted Kozol to become an educator, Chapter One, "Dishonoring the Dead", highlights the searing discrepancies between school age-children affected by acute poverty and those that are not. Kozol states that "a segregated



inner-city school is “almost six times as likely” to be a school of concentrated poverty as is a school that has an overwhelmingly white population” (Kozol, p. 20). Exposing ironies such as hyper segregated schools named after famous African-American champions of civil rights – San Diego’s Rosa Parks High School is 86 percent black and Hispanic, and Philadelphia’s Martin Luther King High School black student body is 98 percent – Kozol displays the isolation felt by some of the inner-city youth that attend these institutions. Chapter 2, “Hitting them Hardest When They’re Small”, begins with examples of student letters Kozol cites that beg for better school conditions: “You have all the thing and we do not have all the thing...can you help us?”(p.39), one letter states. Juxtaposed together in this chapter are accounts of affluent parents vying for their childrens’ admission to “Baby Ivy” private pre-kindergarten schools along with devastating portraits of inner- city school kindergarten and sixth grade classes making the best out of substandard conditions.

As the book moves into a discussion of school practices and discrepancies in conditions, Chapter 3’s “The Ordering Regime” tells of how B.F. Skinnerian-like, rote- and drill classroom approaches in disadvantaged settings have come to be the norm in current urban educational systems, depriving teachers and students of opportunities for innovation. Chapter 4’s “Preparing Minds for Markets” continues with examples of how elementary schools that assign various “managerial” tasks to students such as “Absence Managers” and “Coat Room Managers” infuse youth with the message that a solid work ethic “will prompt companies to give you opportunities to work, to prove yourself, *no matter what you’ve done*” (p. 93, my emphasis), which seemed bemusing to Kozol since it seems excessive, and presupposes a limit to the type of success they may be able to achieve. Additionally, the following chapter, “The Road to Rome”, may make readers bristle as Kozol describes imperious measures taken by some urban high schools to ensure that their children succeed in standardized exams, such as forgoing breaks and recesses, as well as extending school days- measures rarely or never found in wealthier schools. Chapter 6, “A Hardening of Lines” demonstrates a widening gulf between the worlds of “more sophisticated consumers of education (that is, better educated parents)”(Baker & LeTendre, 2005, p. 77) influencing PTA boards to accept their children and the harsh reality of urban high schools that Kozol visits. This is followed by a



saddening portrait of school conditions ranging from lack of materials to vermin-related problems in Chapter 7, “Excluding Beauty”.

The following two chapters mention governmental initiatives and well-known educational administrators in the quest for the eradication of school inequality. Chapter 8, “False Promises”, mentions the implementation and decline of compensatory programs to fight desegregation such as Higher Horizons and Operation Counterpoise. It also discusses the high public hopes and expectations of erstwhile New York City school chancellors Drs. Joseph Fernandez and Rudy Crew, as well as the media attention given to former bat-wielding Paterson, New Jersey principal Joe Clark. With the demise of Fernandez and Crew, and Clark’s departure from the world of education, this chapter contends that “the tantalizing notion that the problems of this system can be superseded somehow by a faith in miracles embodied in dynamic and distinctive individuals” (Kozol, p.200) is simply untrue. Chapter 9, “Invitations to Resistance” starts to consider solutions to the current quagmire. Here, Kozol asserts that principals and teachers in the schools will fail to see apartheid as a distant remnant of the past, and want to see action. He illustrates this chapter with instances of successful school desegregation programs in Wisconsin, Missouri and Kentucky and how some of them are being threatened, even though they show success! According to Gary Orfield, a pre-eminent political scientist and researcher on segregation, “a political movement is a necessary answer” (p. 221).

The next two chapters continue to look at the matter of school desegregation and equality from an educational policy standpoint. In Chapter 10’s “A National Horror Hidden in Plain View: Why Not a National Response?”, Kozol reviews legislative processes against school segregation and criticizes the federal No Child Left Behind Act for failing to “bring the power of the federal government to bear on lessening inequities in funding or in infrastructure between wealthier and more impoverished districts” (p. 240). Chapter 11, “Deadly Lies” reveals the tensions between proponents of the current U.S. standards-based reform efforts and its detractors. Kozol also engages here in a discussion of the counterproductive effect that he feels the “open education” movement in the 1960s had on school inequality. Though President Bush has lauded the success of current standards-based educational approaches, Kozol notes the persistence of a widening gap in the proficiency of math and science students and the worsening of a



shockingly low high school graduation rate for blacks and Hispanics. In an emotional closing, Chapter 12, “Treasured Places” and the Epilogue present to the reader narratives of the lives of Miss Rosa and Mr. Bedrock, a principal and teacher in the Bronx whose unremitting profiles would make those who proudly chose education as their profession remember why they did.

Kozol’s blunt, hard-hitting polemic will no doubt have the propensity to shock and sadden. However, the effect that it has could be twofold. Either it can leave one with more of a sense of hopelessness than with a sense of hope, or serve as an impetus for awareness and eventual action. The concern that I have here is that though the book is a rich constellation of facts, recollections and perspectives on this issue, constructive dialogue on solutions seems to have been forsaken by an overemphasis on the degree to which gross educational disparity exists. For instance, Kozol, in his interview with Gary Orfield, notes Orfield’s sanguine energy when discussing strategies leading from desegregated housing to desegregated schools, but seems to downplay it by saying that “he was speaking as if he believed that this was actually possible” (p.224) This casts more of a negative shadow on the argument. Additionally, the final quote of the book from Roger Wilkins, Professor of History and American Culture at George Mason University, states “I don’t think we have any choice but to reject this acquiescence, to reject defeat” (p. 317), which seems optimistic, but somewhat difficult to believe judging from the rest of the tone of the book. I wonder at times whether Kozol indeed feels as if defeat can be rejected.

His intentions notwithstanding, it is absolutely clear that *The Shame of the Nation* tells a chilling story that must be told. It is important for international readers to understand this story and relate it to their own contexts. In no way does Kozol mince words when in the way he forcefully exhorts us to pay close attention to the educational future of our young. This is must read for anyone concerned with education and school equality. It implores us to remain vigilant in ensuring a sound and optimistic future for our youth through equal education and avoiding letting our children be led in, as Kozol would put it, a perilous direction.



References

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