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EEX 5051

Book Summary/Reflection

*Savage Inequalities, Children in America’s Schools*, written by Jonathan Kozol and published in 1991 looks at the injustices and inequalities in the American public school system from 1988 to 1990, many of which still exist today. Kozol writes heartbreaking details of his experiences in visiting inner-city schools in East St. Louis, Chicago, New York, Camden New Jersey, Washington, D.C., and San Antonio Texas. He brings to light the worst educational inequalities by surveying the lives of children in urban schools and finds that more than forty years after the landmark decision in Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, that declared an end to segregation in schools because it was inherently unequal, black and Hispanic students are still segregated from white students in staggering numbers and are being undeniably cheated educationally.

Kozol draws a disturbing picture as he compares schools in poor, urban areas to those in the wealthier surrounding suburbs. In the poor, urban areas, Kozol speaks of schools “full of sewer water” where the doors are locked with chains and “every student in the school is black;” where “59 children and four grown-ups – 63 in all – must share a room that in a suburban school, would hold no more than 20 children and one teacher;” schools where “textbooks are scarce” and dropout rates are high; schools in which “bathrooms, gymnasiums, hallways and closets have been converted to classrooms” due to overcrowding; where students come to school with “chronic and untreated illnesses” and “fewer than 10 percent of children slotted in special tracks” for neurological disorders and learning disabilities will graduate from school – the majority of whom are black; and, where “eighth grade students cannot add five and two.” (Kozol, 1991)

In stark contrast, Kozol examines the nearby suburban schools and finds beautiful, updated buildings and school grounds with no overcrowding; an abundance of computers, books, supplies and aids to learning; and higher teacher salaries to attract and retain good teachers.

Kozol blames an unjust society for the adversities of inner-city children. He focuses much of his attention on the disparities in funding that foster the inequity in education between urban and suburban schools. Kozol states, “the richer districts – those in which the property lots and houses are more highly valued – have more revenue, derived from taxing land and homes to fund their public schools.” (Kozol, 1991) He points out the economic differences by comparing per capita spending per child in poor, urban neighborhoods to the wealthier, suburban neighborhoods and questions why we, as a society, allow this disparity. Kozol questions why, if we truly value fairness and equality for all, do we continue to allow school segregation. Why do we vehemently protest the redistribution of resources to help poor, urban children get an equal chance at education? Why do we treat poor, minority children as savages unworthy of all that wealthier white children have in society? “They (children) are quite wonderful and innocent when they are small. We soil them needlessly.” (Kozol)

**REFLECTION:**

I found this book very discouraging to read. It was a frustrating reminder of the status quo in our society and the odds that I will face as a teacher interested in working in an urban area. Sadly, even though this book was based on experiences almost 20 years ago, the harsh realities of segregation and inequality still exist today in education and in society as a whole.

As Kozol addresses all of the adversities in urban schools, such as toxic school environments, overcrowding, lack of textbooks, drop-out rates, unqualified teachers, segregation and the lack of financial resources, I couldn’t help but think in terms of them as symptoms of a much greater, systemic problem, none of which, if treated independently of the others would solve the crisis we face in educational systems all across the United States today. How can you passionately speak of equity in the U.S. within the context of our current capitalist economic system?

Capitalism, by its’ very nature, fosters inequality in society. The schools that Kozol speaks of, both the urban and suburban, are direct products of a society that values individual success over that of “collective success.” As many of the suburban students (the “haves”) that Kozol speaks to in his stories respond in “undisguised self-interest” when he suggests they share their resources with the “have nots,” how will this benefit me? Our current economic system relies on an uneven distribution of wealth so poor individuals in need of wages are willing to have their labor exploited and thus foster the success of powerful leaders in production and industry. Redistributing resources in an attempt to equalize the accessibility to the “means of success” faces great opposition because it inherently contradicts capitalist values. Disturbingly, “the fulfillment of the dream of equity for the poor districts is seen by richer districts as a nightmare.”(Kozol, 1991) Equity, indeed, brings a fear of “dispossession” to those who control the means in our society. (Kozol)

As I read in another book a few weeks ago and believe to be true, “black people will never achieve the historical objectives of their long struggle for freedom within the political economy of capitalism. “Fundamental change will require a massive resistance movement largely from below and anchored in the working-class and among oppressed minority groups.” (McClaren, 2007) So, in the meantime, those of us who are truly interested in promoting equality in education through integration and a fair distribution of resources will face many challenges ahead. Throughout our struggles and frustrations that will inevitably arise while working in urban schools, we will continually remind ourselves of our purpose and motivation that ALL children are valuable and that human dignity cannot be measured in economic terms.

HOW ARE PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES PORTRAYED?

Although Savage Inequalities does not speak in depth of students with disabilities, Kozol does give reference to students in urban schools who are “educable mentally retarded,” “trainable mentally retarded,” “low ability,” and “learning disabled.” (Kozol, 1991) He also tells of one child whose learning struggles were dismissed as a result of being “upset by family matters,” and was later diagnosed as having a neurological disorder as a result of her mother’s persistence to get a proper diagnosis. (Kozol) This showed how little attention was even given to students with disabilities in urban schools. In fact, I don’t even think students with disabilities were mentioned in the context of the suburban schools that Kozol visited, leaving one to associate disabilities with the poor, minority students. Overall, students with disabilities are portrayed in a negative way. They are portrayed as just one more burden on an already failing educational system.

REFERENCES:

Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage Inequalities, Children in America’s Schools*. New York: Harper Perennial.

McClaren, P. (2007). *Life in Schools, An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education (5th).* Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.