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BOOKSHELF

Lessons Not Learned

Jonathan Kozol's analysis of American schools is worthy of a third-grader.

BY ABIGAIL THERNSTROM

Jonathan Kozol has a devoted following, and "The Shame of the Nation" will not disappoint his fans. It's vintage Kozol--a jeremiad. His core complaints are familiar: American public schools are segregated, and those that have few whites in them are financially starved. He adds only one new element: The standards, testing and accountability "juggernaut" has crushed the "humane and happy" education we once had.

The de jure segregation of the South in 1954, Mr. Kozol argues, was no different from the de facto separation of the races today. Urban children experience "virtual apartheid" and "the conditions of internment." Visiting schools in New York, Mr. Kozol "cannot discern the slightest hint that any vestige of the legal victory embodied in *Brown v. Board of Education* . . . has survived."

Principals in segregated schools "create an architecture of adaptive strategies" that include "a relentless emphasis on raising test scores," "scripted lesson plans," "heightened discipline" and other policies that emulate the military--a "command and absolute control" image that Mr. Kozol uses repeatedly. Describing a South Bronx fourth-grade classroom, he writes about the Cuban schools he once visited. In those schools, however, "the students were allowed to question me, and did so with charm and curiosity." What he saw of Cuban education "could not rival" that which he found in New York "in its totalitarian effectiveness."

"The Shame of the Nation" is basically an updated version of Mr. Kozol's 1991 book, "Savage Inequalities." That book reportedly sold 250,000 in hardcover alone, so one can understand the entrepreneurial logic of recycling its ideas. To be sure, Mr. Kozol has a seductive formula: Ignore most social scientists, listen to the children themselves and react with deep moral outrage to the tales of deprivation they tell. The most reliable evidence as to what actually goes on in schools, he writes, does not come from experts but from children, who are "pure witnesses." "You have all the things and we do not have all the things," a third-grader tells Mr. Kozol. She gets it: The principle of "simple justice" has been violated. Everyone should have the same "things."

And everyone can--at least with respect to education. "This nation can afford to give clean places and green spaces . . . to virtually every child in our public schools," Mr. Kozol claims. He proposes higher taxes, with the revenue "equitably distributed." But "equitable" actually means, by his formula, unequal funding--a great deal more money

for urban youngsters than for those who are white and middle-class. (Actually, in Mr. Kozol's universe, white and middle-class are redundant adjectives. And academically successful Asians in big-city schools have been airbrushed out of the picture.)

Is he suggesting that, with more money to buy those clean places and green spaces, inner-city kids would catch up with their higher-performing peers? Mr. Kozol pays such scant attention to academic achievement that it's unclear. He is against longer school days, summer school for kids who need it, charter schools (and other forms of choice), merit pay and every promising avenue of school reform. He does, as an aside, acknowledge that kids should learn "essential skills," but his main concern is with schools that exude "warmth and playfulness and informality and cheerful camaraderie among the teachers and their children."

One hates to argue with religious conviction, but Mr. Kozol's faith-based writing has little grounding in actual evidence. The words "segregation" and "apartheid" run like a mantra through the book, as if repetition will somehow make them true. In fact, American schools are not segregated; their racial composition reflects the nation's changing demographics.

Typically about 30% of the classmates of both blacks and Hispanics are white, but in big-city school districts whites are in short supply. The Los Angeles Unified School District, for instance, is 71% Latino, while a mere 10% of its students are white. Whites constitute only 15% of students in New York City, 10% in Chicago and Houston, and so forth. Mr. Kozol may be the last moral man standing, but his nonstop sermonizing will not change the racial composition of the big-city schools that most black and Hispanic students attend.

Instead of undertaking an analysis that looks at the facts and grapples with the hard reality of dysfunctional families, disruptive kids, undereducated teachers, stifling union contracts and a host of other ills, Mr. Kozol talks dreamily of a new protest movement led by parents and teachers who have nothing to lose but their chains. As Lincoln once famously said about a book: "People who like this sort of thing will find this the sort of thing they like."

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