Savage Exaggerations
Worshiping the cosmology of Jonathan Kozol

Checked:


Death at an Early Age. Penguin Group, 1967

Checked by Marcus A. Winters

Jonathan Kozol has made a good living talking with students. His books chronicle travels among poor, minority children, most of them African Americans in struggling public schools. They are not gentle accounts. His first book, published in 1967, was called Death at an Early Age. Nor are his books politically tepid: his latest, published in 2005, is called The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America.

In the four decades that Jonathan Kozol, now 70, has been writing books—11 so far—his message has hardly wavered: minority children are unsuccessful because rich, white Americans have little interest in using their vast resources to help them. In each of his works Kozol seems intent on burdening other white upper-class Americans with guilt enough for them to see the light and share their wealth. With this attractive message Kozol has won a loyal following among school teachers, policymakers, and book-reading citizens. Not only are many of his books bestsellers, but they have become staples on education-course syllabi. Even education researchers think his work has value: he has been cited 1,790 times in journals counted in the Social Science Citation Index, quite a feat for a popular author. Ordinarily, only influential scholars achieve such recognition. Shame of the Nation got a prepublication boost when Harper’s magazine ran an excerpt and featured...
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It on the cover. The author also received a fawning New York Times Magazine interview; Shame leaped on to the Times bestseller list two weeks after its publication in September.

The notoriety has perhaps gone to Kozol’s head. In his first book, Death at an Early Age, he described the horrific experience of teaching at, and being fired from, a segregated public school in Boston. The book has the feel of being written by a young, dedicated, public school teacher on the frontlines of a major battle, which is exactly what Kozol was. So open to new ideas was he at that time that in another of his earlier volumes, Free Schools, he even hinted at a solution not much different from the one advocated by choice supporters today. More on that later.

In the books that have followed, however, Kozol, no longer in the trenches, seems to have less to write about and offers little more than the old, tired, and failed solutions for the problems of our schools. He tells similar stories, revisits old haunts, has, essentially, the same conversations. Adding to the monotony, Kozol’s most recent books, in fact, are as much about him as about American education. They contain long digressions about his compassionate understanding of the plight of urban youth. In my copy of Ordinary Resurrections, published in 2000, Kozol is even featured on the cover, showing the dramatic transformation of the author from reporter of others’ stories to chronicler of his own. Though he writes with a compelling sense of injustice, much of Kozol’s work is a form of self-reflection that masks—brilliantly, given the popularity of his books—what is an increasingly skewed description of our nation’s schools.

Though it is difficult to judge Kozol’s specific impact on education policy in America, there is no doubt of his influence on the way Americans frame the questions that drive that policymaking. But is the Kozol prism a clarifying one? Is his insistence on our racial sins a sufficient or even accurate way to understand our education problems?

Those Slippery Facts
Shame of the Nation, as its subtitle proclaims, purports to be about segregation. Kozol’s point that urban public schools are too racially homogeneous is certainly not novel; many urban public schools clearly have majority single-race populations. However, Kozol misses the mark in attributing that problem to, or suggesting that its solution is in, our education system. In fact, as Duke economist Charles Clotfelter has pointed out, segregation levels within school districts have actually decreased since the 1970s, after allowing for the changing demographic of urban populations. That decrease has only been offset by the tendency of higher-income families, both black and white, to move to suburban communities with more family-friendly schools and safer environments.

Kozol recognizes that migration is the explanation for continuing segregation, but says its cause is racism. This leads him to propose policies that are so impractical as to be unhelpful. For example, he advocates school busing and other such measures that attempt to get whites to mingle with blacks through coercion, measures that are outside the realm of the politically feasible. Oddly, he rejects more promising policies that rely less on the power of the state. He eschews school-choice policies, for instance, even while conceding that they have led to school desegregation in cities where they have been tried. He says that choice does not work unless it is regulated. Even if we concede his point, it is unclear why he should oppose regulated choice policies if they work. Why should integration be worthwhile only if it is forced?

That Kozol expresses such strenuous opposition to vouchers is all the more peculiar, given his earlier passion for “Free Schools.” His 1972 book of that title is a manual on how to start and operate private schools outside what he saw as an excessively regulated public school system. In Free Schools, Kozol wrote that urban parents should exit the public school system because reforms within the system, “no matter how inventive or how passionate or how immediately provocative,” are simply an “extension of the ideology of public school.” Those reforms, said Kozol, “cannot, for reasons of immediate operation, finance, and survival, raise serious doubts about the indoctrination and custodial function of the public education apparatus.”

Racist Reforms
But his tune on that particular reform has changed since he became the idol of that same education establishment.
Now Kozol has little interest in improvements outside the current system, such as vouchers and charters. Why? Because, he says in Shame, it “opens up a gate of sorts for a small fraction of poor people.” Never mind that the body of empirical evidence suggests that choice helps not only the children who leave failing public schools but also those left behind. Studies of voucher programs in Florida, Milwaukee, and San Antonio all find that vouchers not only have not harmed public schools; they have improved them.

Vouchers are not the only reform to which Kozol objects. On the contrary, he treats almost any proposed restructuring as little more than racism in disguise. “Although generically described as ‘school reform,’” he writes in Shame, “most of these practices and policies are targeted at poor children of color,” failing to explain why reform should not be directed at the lowest-performing schools. One favorite Kozol target is desegregation. Kozol uses the term to describe inequality in urban centers, Kozol produces stories that are exactly those that for which Success for All actually helps exactly that population for which Kozol expresses a profound allegiance. As is his wont, he ignores the results from a randomized field trial, conducted by Johns Hopkins researchers, that found that Success for All has large, statistically significant positive effects on student literacy.

The Original Sin: Unequal Education Spending

So, besides desegregating schools, what does Kozol want to do? Surprisingly enough, for all of his self-expressed idealism, he turns out to be as naive a materialist as one would expect from someone who has found his own moneymaking formula. Again and again Kozol returns to his primary message: give those schools more money! No reform short of unloading a dump-truck filled with hundred-dollar bills on the campus of each urban public school will solve today’s education ills.

While his books consist largely of a series of sad stories, it is Kozol’s use of numbers that gives those stories their meaning and impact. He and his faithful readers believe that the dollars not spent on education make all the difference. To highlight the funding disparities in urban centers, Kozol produces an appendix in both Shame of the Nation and Savage Inequalities with tables comparing per pupil spending in several cities, including New York, Chicago, and urban New Jersey, with that in select surrounding suburban districts. Not surprisingly, the wealthiest districts in the area spend a good deal more money than the most poverty-stricken parts of the city.

Kozol points out that the wealthiest suburban school districts surrounding New York City, for example, spend more per pupil to educate their mostly white student bodies than the city spends to educate its mostly minority population. He produces interviews with children in schools receiving less funding; the children ask, in their small voices, why it is that they do not have everything that rich children have. It is a powerful rhetorical device perhaps, but not one that has much bearing on the question of student outcomes. The fact is, though Kozol ignores it, that changing the incentives of urban schools (with choice or accountability) yields much more of a change in performance than more money does.

One indication that more spending might not be the answer is that while urban public schools might not spend as much as the wealthiest districts surrounding them, they do spend what those wealthy districts spent in the past. For example, Kozol points to funding disparities around Boston, which is where he started his career. In 1999 Weston, a Boston suburb, spent $10,039 per pupil, in adjusted 2003 dollars, and that year its 4th-grade students averaged a scale score of 248 on the state reading test. In 2003 the Boston school district spent $10,057 per pupil, similar to what Weston spent in 1999 in real dollars. However, while Boston’s spending caught up to Weston’s previous expenditures, its test scores did not. Boston’s students scored an average of 224 on the 4th-grade reading assessment in 2003. Boston’s reading scores were only a one-point improvement from 1999, when the district spent an inflation-adjusted $9,213. Similarly, in their book No Excuses, the Manhattan Institute’s Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom point out that the financial inequalities in urban New Jersey had largely been done away with by 2000–01, yet school outcomes showed no discernible improvement. Since suburban students certainly have other advantages over the average student in the cities, we might not expect equal spending to produce identical results. But if Kozol is right, shouldn’t it at least bring about progress?

Kozol’s analysis is just as wrong elsewhere in the country. New York City schools, for instance, might spend less

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than the few school districts that educate the sons and daughters of New York’s investment bankers (who live in those rich suburbs). My analysis, using the same data on school districts in the Empire State that Kozol cites, finds that districts with a higher percentage of African American students actually spend more money than other districts in the state on average.

A Relative Problem

Kozol scoffs at figures suggesting that schools are failing to improve despite increases in funding. In *Savage Inequalities* he attempts to rebut what is perhaps the most popular critique among education reformers—that over the past 30 years there has been a doubling in real dollars in education spending and no significant progress in education achievement measured in test scores or graduation rates. Discussing a *Wall Street Journal* editorial that pointed this out, Kozol writes, in *Savage Inequalities*, “What the Journal does not add is that per-pupil spending grew at the same rate in the suburbs as it did in urban districts ... thereby preventing any catch-up by the urban schools.” The most important education reform, in Kozol’s view, is for urban schools to have as much money as the richest suburban ones. He ignores the fact that, overall, central-city schools outspend the typical suburban school, to say nothing of those in small towns and rural areas (see Figure 1).

But why should a district’s performance depend entirely on what is happening elsewhere? Greater spending must lead to at least some education gains as long as the funds are well spent. Kozol is the first to argue that urban schools lack the physical amenities of suburban schools. So when urban schools get more money, as even Kozol admits has been the case, why can’t those amenities be provided, regardless of what suburban schools are doing? If a school lacks air-conditioning, for example, and if one expects this amenity to affect student performance, then the addition of air-conditioning should improve outcomes regardless of whether another school builds a swimming pool.

Kozol argues that only relative spending matters, because both suburban and urban schools are hiring out of the same labor pool. Thus it might not matter how much urban districts spend, because as long as they spend less than other districts they will get the same poor-quality teachers. But this assumes that the labor pool for teachers cannot change. As schools have more money they should either bid up the price for teachers or be able to hire more teachers at the same price. In theory, either of these changes should lift all boats, either by improving the overall quality of the labor pool or by reducing class size. If more money does not provide better amenities, or a higher quality workforce, or smaller classes, or if it produces these things and performance does not improve, then we must conclude that more money is not the answer.

Kozol often insists that he will believe that more money will not improve urban public schools when rich Americans stop trying to spend more money on their schools. The trouble with this seemingly reasonable quip is that it fails to recognize that urban and suburban schools are more separated by their incentive structure than they are by their bank accounts.

If we assume that suburban districts improve with greater funds (perhaps a stronger assumption than many realize), it is also reasonable to assume that they face consequences if they use those additional resources unwisely. If suburban schools do not live up to their price tag, then their active parents and other
taxpayers worried about their property values put pressure on policymakers to improve them. If the school continues to fail, suburbanites will move to the next town over, or they will send their child to a private school.

On the other side of the tracks, however, urban schools have a captive clientele. Low-income minority parents have neither the resources to move out of their city nor the political power to force policymakers to meet their education needs. Without consequences for failure, urban public schools have little incentive to use their resources wisely. Thus increasing urban public-school budgets will fail to improve their performance until urban schools are operating under the same incentives as suburban schools. Kozol blithely ignores the existence of these differing incentives in his Ahab-like pursuit of more money.

When we step back and look at the evidence, it becomes clear that changing the incentives for urban public schools is far more attractive a reform than providing them with more funds. Increasingly, the scientific research indicates little to no relationship between escalating education expenditures and improvements in academic outcomes. Erik Hanushek’s 1996 review of the research on school funding found that only 27 of 163 studies indicated that spending more dollars improved student outcomes. Kozol ignores these findings. He ignores the evidence (by Hanushek and Margaret Raymond, as well as by Martin Carnoy and Susanna Loeb) that changing the incentives for public schools with high-stakes testing is succeeding where simply increasing resources has failed. He ignores the wide body of research suggesting that school-choice policies improve public schools by forcing them to compete for students that they used to take for granted. He laments that paying teachers for their successful performance taints their “unselfish inclinations that are not at all unlike the call to ministry,” without discussing the evidence suggesting that these programs have been successful at improving student outcomes.

Who Needs Research?
Kozol is contemptuous of empirical research on education. Test scores, he says, tell us nothing about the number of times a day that a child smiles, which is what really counts in our schools. Kozol feels it unnecessary to rely on empirical measures of achievement because they “don’t speak of happiness.” We can understand schools only by walking around in them and talking with children. In Shame of the Nation, he writes that he trusts his interviews with children because, “Unlike these powerful grown-ups, children have no ideologies to reinforce, no superstructure of political opinion to promote, no civic equanimity or image to defend, no personal reputation to secure.”

Unfortunately, what all but the most unusual children lack is perspective, foresight, and knowledge. This is why we don’t let children marry, imbibe alcohol, or, for that matter, decide what time they will go to sleep. We should be similarly hesitant to base decisions that cost billions of dollars and might affect the structure of society on their musings.

What makes children so useful to a Kozol-style researcher is the ease with which the researcher can evoke the answers that are sought, especially when one can pick and choose from among the children one wants to include in the next bestseller.

When one follows the basic canons of social science, which require sensitivity to the biases of respondents and the biases that can come from selecting individuals in any way other than randomly, then one cannot so easily construct fanciful castles out of the comments of either children or adults. That is the greatest virtue of the social-science methodologies that Kozol regularly denigrates. Quality research forces us to step back, removing ourselves from our predispositions and the feelings that might force our eyes to lie to us. Statistics can surely be manipulated, as Kozol himself proves, but at least the limitations are verifiable and the truth of the matter is not dependent on the eye of the beholder.

Admittedly, many scholars pay more attention to how well children are doing on tests designed to measure how much they are learning in school than to the simplistic responses children tend to give. But that is the only way we can find out if they know how to read, or write, or add numbers. Without skills, these children whom Kozol professes to love so dearly, and whom he quotes so extensively, will never acquire the skills that will allow them to lead happy, productive adult lives. Money is Kozol’s only reform model, and it will hardly preserve the smile on those children’s faces.

It’s difficult to visualize the system Kozol wants for us. Beyond his insistent pleas for an equitable distribution of the money in education, he provides few specifics. In fact, though, the best argument against Kozol’s prescription is that the money spent on American public schools doubled over the past 30 years—yet outcomes in education have remained as savagely unequal as ever and will remain so until the incentives of urban schools are changed. To the extent that it persuades people to avoid reforms that change school incentives in favor of ever-increasing school spending, Jonathan Kozol’s work is an impediment to the very thing that he claims to desire most: a day when urban minority children receive an acceptable education.

Marcus A. Winters is a senior research associate at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. He is also a doctoral fellow in the department of education reform at the University of Arkansas.

check the facts
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