

Falling behind: An interview with Jonathan Kozol: Language and labels in educational policy

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*Beginning with his 1967 book Death at an Early Age, Jonathan Kozol has been a sharp critic of American education. In Amazing Grace (1995), Kozol described the residents of Mott Haven in the South Bronx, the poorest congressional district in the U.S. In his most recent book, Ordinary Resurrections, Kozol continues his account of the children of Mott Haven. We spoke with him about the schools of the South Bronx and about contemporary debates on education.*

**You've spent a lifetime concerned with children and educational policy. What's changed in education since you began writing and working?**

The greatest difference between now and 1964, when I began teaching, is that public policy has pretty much eradicated the dream of Martin Luther King. In fact, the public schools today are every bit as segregated as they were in 1964. In those days at least we had the sense that the government, the courts and public opinion were on the side of racial integration. Lyndon Johnson himself stood before Congress and said, "We shall overcome." We don't hear political leaders speaking in those terms anymore. And there is a general sense that society no longer intends to bring black and Hispanic children into the mainstream of society.

**How do the schools in the South Bronx reflect this segregation?**

In the South Bronx 99.8 percent of the children are either black or Hispanic. Two-tenths of one percentage point marks the difference between legally enforced segregation in Mississippi 40 years ago, and socially and economically enforced segregation in New York today. Children in these schools don't know any white children and white children don't know them.

Their schools are also grossly unequal. A little girl like Pineapple, whom I first met when she was in kindergarten in the South Bronx, receives about \$5,000 in education money each year. If you could lift up Pineapple in your arms and plunk her down in the richest suburb of New York, she would receive \$15,000 to \$20,000 every year. Add to that the fact the children in this section of the South Bronx virtually

never get to attend preschool. Only 20 percent of the children in this neighborhood can be admitted to Headstart because there is so little money available for the program. Meanwhile, the children of the affluent are getting two and sometimes three years of full-day developmental preschool. So children like Pineapple are already one to three years behind middle-class children when they enter public school. Then we spend on them only about half or a quarter of what we're spending on wealthy children.

### **What perpetuates this situation?**

We have a meritocracy of money in which good public education is passed on from one generation to the next. With privilege goes the opportunity to earn enough money so that you can live in a wealthy suburb and perpetuate this inequality by passing it on to your children. So long as these kinds of inequalities persist, all of us who are given expensive educations have to live with the knowledge that our victories are contaminated because the game has been rigged to our advantage.

I have friends who are political and economic conservatives, wealthy people who send their children to private schools in New England at a cost of \$25,000 to \$30,000 a year. They ask me, "Can you really solve these education problems by spending more money?" I generally respond by saying, "It seems to do the trick for your children, doesn't it?"

If high salaries for school teachers and small class size and attractive spacious buildings equipped with beautiful libraries and computers are good for the son or daughter of a president or a member of the Senate or a CEO, then they're also good for the poorest child in the Bronx. At heart this is a theological issue. I happen to be Jewish, but I've read the Gospel where Jesus says, "If you love me, feed my sheep." He didn't say only the sheep that dwell in the green pastures. He didn't say only the sheep whose parents make smart choices.

### **In *Ordinary Resurrections* you suggest that even the atmosphere and language used in educational debates have changed in recent years.**

When I was a young teacher, we used the verb "educate" to speak about what we were doing with the children of poor people as well as the children of rich people. Today in the inner city, the operative verb is not "educate" but "train." Both school officials and business leaders fall into this pattern. The pressure is to train black and Hispanic children to be suitable employees. Business leaders will say to me, "I'm on

your side, Jonathan. I want to do something for those children. I see them as my future entry-level workers.” This is a devastating change. I frequently suppress the wish to answer, “If you need entry-level labor, why don’t you train your own children to be entry-level labor and educate children like Pineapple to be the next CEO?”

Even President Clinton has subscribed to the “school-to-work” program. The idea is that children will be trained from as early as sixth grade to function in a specific industrial or commercial operation. At ages 12 and 13, children in the South Bronx are being pushed to choose a middle or junior high school corresponding to the career that they intend to enter. It’s outrageous to ask a child to choose her destiny. Even worse, however, is the idea that we’re valuing these children only for their future productive contribution to our society. It devalues childhood. Instead of seeing these children for the blessings that they are, we are measuring them only by the standard of whether they will be future deficits or assets for our nation’s competitive needs.

It’s a profoundly racist agenda. We would never speak about our own children this way. We educate them to go on to universities and acquire the broad, sophisticated base of knowledge from which they can make real choices, and change their choices many times. But for the children of the poorest people we’re stripping the curriculum, removing the arts and music, and drilling the children into useful labor. We’re not valuing a child for the time in which she actually is a child.

The liberals who advocate for more money for good programs like Headstart tend to go along with this corporate agenda. I’m ashamed to say that I used to sit in front of a House or Senate committee on Capitol Hill and say, “Every dollar you invest in Headstart will save \$6.00 later on in higher productivity or in lower prison cost,” or some other obscene argument of that sort. I’m ashamed that I made such arguments. Why not invest in them because they’re babies and deserve to have some joy in life before they die? Why not do it because we’re a rich country and we can afford to bless them when they’re children? Why not do it because they come to us as blessings? Children are not simply commodities to be herded into line and trained for the jobs that white people who live in segregated neighborhoods have available. I find that offensive.

**If you were an adviser to one of the presidential candidates, which issues would you insist that he address?**

I would advise the candidate to reopen the dream of Martin Luther King. King did not say I have a dream that some day we will give more exams to children in our inner cities. He did not say I have a dream that some day we will hold children whom we have cheated accountable for their failure. He did not even say I have a dream that we will put more computers and better software into segregated schools, which is pretty much what the candidates are talking about. I would like to see a presidential candidate resolve to fight the enormous forces within the banking and real estate industries and the media that have locked us into a shameful and perpetual apartheid.

Second, I would ask the candidate to abolish the local property tax as the source of school funding and instead fund the public education of every American child out of the federal income tax. Then a child's education would not depend on whether she was born in the poorest white rural section of southern Ohio or the richest white suburb of New England. After all, when we ask children to pledge allegiance to the flag, it's not to the flag of the South Bronx or Beverly Hills, but to the American flag.

### **Do you see proposals for vouchers helping or hurting the cause of education?**

I am opposed to the use of public funds for private education. If we allow public funds to be used to support our relatively benign, morally grounded schools, we will have to allow those public funds to be used for any type of private school. Vouchers can also be used for a David Duke school or a right-wing militia school or a Louis Farrakhan school—any type of ethnically or ideologically extremist school with a hateful and divisive agenda. This would rip apart the social fabric of already fragile cities like Los Angeles, Chicago and New York, with their multiplicity of ethnic, political and ideological groups. It would be the last nail in the coffin of public education.

Many of those who argue for vouchers say that they simply want to use competition to improve public education. I don't think it works that way, and I've been watching this for a long time. What tends to happen is that the families that are drawn off into private schools tend to be the more sophisticated, even among the poor. Or the more aggressive among the poor. Even when these schools are not consciously selective, they tend to be self-selective and drain off not only money from the public schools, but also strong parental activism. The private schools take away the very parents we need most as passionate PTA leaders. What happens to the children who are left behind?