

CLASSIC

CONTEMPORARY

CROSS-CULTURAL

64 Savage Inequalities: Children in U.S. Schools

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The job of our schools, we like to believe, is to give children a chance to develop their abilities and compete with others for their place in society. But has the game been “fixed” right from the start? Comparing two schools in New York City, Jonathan Kozol points to “savage inequalities” that perpetuate—or even increase—class differences.

“In a country where there is no distinction of class,” Lord Acton wrote of the United States 130 years ago, “a child is not born to the station of its parents, but with an indefinite claim to all the prizes that can be won by thought and labor. It is in conformity with the theory of equality . . . to give as near as possible to every youth an equal state in life.” Americans, he said, “are unwilling that any should be deprived in childhood of the means of competition.”

It is hard to read these words today without a sense of irony and sadness. Denial of “the means of competition” is perhaps the single most consistent outcome of the education offered to poor children in the schools of our large cities; and nowhere is this pattern of denial more explicit or more absolute than in the public schools of New York City.

Average expenditures per pupil in the city of New York in 1987 were some \$5,500. In the highest spending suburbs of New York (Great Neck or

Manhasset, for example, on Long Island) funding levels rose above \$11,000, with the highest districts in the state at \$15,000. “Why . . .,” asks the city’s Board of Education, “should our students receive less” than do “similar students” who live elsewhere? “The inequity is clear.”

But the inequality to which these words refer goes even further than the school board may be eager to reveal. “It is perhaps the supreme irony,” says the nonprofit Community Service Society [CSS] of New York, that “the same Board of Education which perceives so clearly the inequities” of funding between separate towns and cities “is perpetuating similar inequities” right in New York. And, in comment on the Board of Education’s final statement—“the inequity is clear” the CSS observes, “New York City’s poorest . . . districts could adopt that eloquent statement with few changes.”

New York City’s public schools are subdivided into thirty-two school districts. District 10 encompasses a large part of the Bronx but is, effectively, two separate districts. One of these districts, Riverdale, is in the northwest section of the Bronx. Home to many of the city’s most

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sophisticated and well-educated families, its elementary schools have relatively few low-income students. The other section, to the south and east, is poor and heavily nonwhite.

The contrast between public schools in each of these two neighborhoods is obvious to any visitor. At Public School 24 in Riverdale, the principal speaks enthusiastically of his teaching staff. At Public School 79, serving poorer children to the south, the principal says that he is forced to take the “tenth-best” teachers. “I thank God they’re still breathing,” he remarks of those from whom he must select his teachers.

Some years ago, District 10 received an allocation for computers. The local board decided to give each elementary school an equal number of computers, even though the schools in Riverdale had smaller classes and far fewer students. When it was pointed out that schools in Riverdale, as a result, had twice the number of computers in proportion to their student populations as the schools in the poor neighborhoods, the chairman of the local board replied, “What is fair is what is determined . . . to be fair.”

The superintendent of District 10, Fred Goldberg, tells *The New York Times* that “every effort” is made “to distribute resources equitably.” He speculates that some gap might exist because some of the poorer schools need to use funds earmarked for computers to buy basic supplies like pens and paper. Asked about the differences in teachers noted by the principals, he says there are no differences, then adds that next year he’ll begin a program to improve the quality of teachers in the poorer schools. Questioned about differences in physical appearances between the richer and the poorer schools, he says, “I think it’s demographics.”

Sometimes a school principal, whatever his background or his politics, looks into the faces of the children in his school and offers a disarming statement that cuts through official ambiguity. “These are the kids most in need,” says Edward Flanery, the principal of one of the low-income schools, “and they get the worst teachers.” For

children of diverse needs in his overcrowded rooms, he says, “you need an outstanding teacher. And what do you get? You get the worst.”

In order to find Public School 261 in District 10, a visitor is told to look for a mortician’s office. The funeral home, which faces Jerome Avenue in the North Bronx, is easy to identify by its green awning. The school is next door, in a former roller-skating rink. No sign identifies the building as a school. A metal awning frame without an awning supports a flagpole, but there is no flag.

In the street in front of the school there is an elevated public transit line. Heavy traffic fills the street. The existence of the school is virtually concealed within this crowded city block.

In a vestibule between the outer and inner glass doors of the school there is a sign with these words: “All children are capable of learning.”

Beyond the inner doors a guard is seated. The lobby is long and narrow. The ceiling is low. There are no windows. All the teachers that I see at first are middle-aged white women. The principal, who is also a white woman, tells me that the school’s “capacity” is 900 but that there are 1,300 children here. The size of classes for fifth and sixth grade children in New York, she says, is “capped” at thirty-two, but she says that class size in the school goes “up to thirty-four.” (I later see classes, however, as large as thirty-seven.) Classes for younger children, she goes on, are “capped at twenty-five,” but a school can go above this limit if it puts an extra adult in the room. Lack of space, she says, prevents the school from operating a prekindergarten program.

I ask the principal where her children go to school. They are enrolled in private school, she says.

“Lunchtime is a challenge for us,” she explains. “Limited space obliges us to do it in three shifts, 450 children at a time.”

Textbooks are scarce and children have to share their social studies books. The principal says there is one full-time pupil counselor and another who is here two days a week: a ratio of 930 children to one counselor. The carpets are

patched and sometimes taped together to conceal an open space. “I could use some new rugs,” she observes.

To make up for the building’s lack of windows and the crowded feeling that results, the staff puts plants and fish tanks in the corridors. Some of the plants are flourishing. Two boys, released from class, are in a corridor beside a tank, their noses pressed against the glass. A school of pinkish fish inside the tank are darting back and forth. Farther down the corridor a small Hispanic girl is watering the plants.

Two first grade classes share a single room without a window, divided only by a blackboard. Four kindergartens and a sixth grade class of Spanish-speaking children have been packed into a single room in which, again, there is no window. A second grade bilingual class of thirty-seven children has its own room but again there is no window.

By eleven o’clock, the lunchroom is already packed with appetite and life. The kids line up to get their meals, then eat them in ten minutes. After that, with no place they can go to play, they sit and wait until it’s time to line up and go back to class.

On the second floor I visit four classes taking place within another undivided space. The room has a low ceiling. File cabinets and movable blackboards give a small degree of isolation to each class. Again, there are no windows.

The library is a tiny, windowless and claustrophobic room. I count approximately 700 books. Seeing no reference books, I ask a teacher if encyclopedias and other reference books are kept in classrooms.

“We don’t have encyclopedias in classrooms,” she replies. “That is for the suburbs.”

The school, I am told, has twenty-six computers for its 1,300 children. There is one small gym and children get one period, and sometimes two, each week. Recess, however, is not possible because there is no playground. “Head Start,” the principal says, “scarcely exists in District 10. We have no space.”

The school, I am told, is 90 percent black and Hispanic; the other 10 percent are Asian, white or Middle Eastern.

In a sixth grade social studies class the walls are bare of words or decorations. There seems to be no ventilation system, or, if one exists, it isn’t working.

The class discusses the Nile River and the Fertile Crescent.

The teacher, in a droning voice: “How is it useful that these civilizations developed close to rivers?”

A child, in a good loud voice: “What kind of question is that?”

In my notes I find these words: “An uncomfortable feeling—being in a building with no windows. There are metal ducts across the room. Do they give air? I feel asphyxiated. . . .”

On the top floor of the school, a sixth grade of thirty children shares a room with twenty-nine bilingual second graders. Because of the high class size there is an assistant with each teacher. This means that fifty-nine children and four grown-ups—sixty-three in all—must share a room that, in a suburban school, would hold no more than twenty children and one teacher. There are, at least, some outside windows in this room—it is the only room with windows in the school—and the room has a high ceiling. It is a relief to see some daylight.

I return to see the kindergarten classes on the ground floor and feel stifled once again by lack of air and the low ceiling. Nearly 120 children and adults are doing what they can to make the best of things: eighty children in four kindergarten classes, thirty children in the sixth grade class, and about eight grown-ups who are aides and teachers. The kindergarten children sitting on the worn rug, which is patched with tape, look up at me and turn their heads to follow me as I walk past them.

As I leave the school, a sixth grade teacher stops to talk. I ask her, “Is there air conditioning in warmer weather?”

Teachers, while inside the building, are reluctant to give answers to this kind of question.

Outside, on the sidewalk, she is less constrained: “I had an awful room last year. In the winter it was 56 degrees. In the summer it was up to 90. It was sweltering.”

I ask her, “Do the children ever comment on the building?”

“They don’t say,” she answers, “but they know.”

I ask her if they see it as a racial message.

“All these children see TV,” she says. “They know what suburban schools are like. Then they look around them at their school. This was a roller-rink, you know. . . . They don’t comment on it but you see it in their eyes. They understand.” . . .

Two months later, on a day in May, I visit an elementary school in Riverdale. The dogwoods and magnolias on the lawn in front of P.S. 24 are in full blossom on the day I visit. There is a well-tended park across the street, another larger park three blocks away. To the left of the school is a playground for small children, with an innovative jungle gym, a slide and several climbing toys. Behind the school there are two playing fields for older kids. The grass around the school is neatly trimmed.

The neighborhood around the school, by no means the richest part of Riverdale, is nonetheless expensive and quite beautiful. Residences in the area—some of which are large, freestanding houses, others condominiums in solid red-brick buildings—sell for prices in the region of \$400,000; but some of the larger Tudor houses on the winding and tree-shaded streets close to the school can cost up to \$1 million. The excellence of P.S. 24, according to the principal, adds to the value of these homes. Advertisements in *The New York Times* will frequently inform prospective buyers that a house is “in the neighborhood of P.S. 24.”

The school serves 825 children in the kindergarten through sixth grade. This is . . . a great deal smaller than the 1,300 children packed into the former skating rink; but the principal of P.S. 24, a capable and energetic man named David Rothstein, still regards it as excessive for an elementary school.

The school is integrated in the strict sense that the middle- and upper-middle-class white children here do occupy a building that contains some Asian and Hispanic and black children; but there is little integration in the classrooms since the vast majority of the Hispanic and black children are assigned to “special” classes on the basis of evaluations that have classified them “EMR”—“educable mentally retarded”—or else, in the worst of cases, “TMR”—“trainable mentally retarded.”

I ask the principal if any of his students qualify for free-lunch programs. “About 130 do,” he says. “Perhaps another thirty-five receive their lunches at reduced price. Most of these kids are in the special classes. They do not come from this neighborhood.”

The very few nonwhite children that one sees in mainstream classes tend to be Japanese or else of other Asian origins. Riverdale, I learn, has been the residence of choice for many years to members of the diplomatic corps.

The school therefore contains effectively two separate schools: one of about 130 children, most of whom are poor, Hispanic, black, assigned to one of the twelve special classes; the other of some 700 mainstream students, almost all of whom are white or Asian.

There is a third track also—this one for the students who are labeled “talented” or “gifted.” This is termed a “pull out” program since the children who are so identified remain in mainstream classrooms but are taken out for certain periods each week to be provided with intensive and, in my opinion, excellent instruction in some areas of reasoning and logic often known as “higher-order skills” in the contemporary jargon of the public schools. Children identified as “gifted” are admitted to this program in first grade and, in most cases, will remain there for six years. Even here, however, there are two tracks of the gifted. The regular gifted classes are provided with only one semester of this specialized instruction yearly. Those very few children, on the other hand, who are identified

as showing the most promise are assigned, beginning in the third grade, to a program that receives a full-year regimen.

In one such class, containing ten intensely verbal and impressive fourth grade children, nine are white and one is Asian. The “special” class I enter first, by way of contrast, has twelve children of whom only one is white and none is Asian. These racial breakdowns prove to be predictive of the schoolwide pattern.

In a classroom for the gifted on the first floor of the school, I ask a child what the class is doing. “Logic and syllogisms,” she replies. The room is fitted with a planetarium. The principal says that all the elementary schools in District 10 were given the same planetariums ten years ago but that certain schools, because of overcrowding, have been forced to give them up. At P.S. 261, according to my notes, there was a domelike space that had been built to hold a planetarium, but the planetarium had been removed to free up space for the small library collection. P.S. 24, in contrast, has a spacious library that holds almost 8,000 books. The windows are decorated with attractive, brightly colored curtains and look out on flowering trees. The principal says that it’s inadequate, but it appears spectacular to me after the cubicle that holds a meager 700 books within the former skating rink.

The district can’t afford librarians, the principal says, but P.S. 24, unlike the poorer schools of District 10, can draw on educated parent volunteers who staff the room in shifts three days a week. A parent organization also raises independent funds to buy materials, including books, and will soon be running a fund-raiser to enhance the library’s collection.

In a large and sunny first grade classroom that I enter next, I see twenty-three children, all of whom are white or Asian. In another first grade, there are twenty-two white children and two others who are Japanese. There is a computer in each class. Every classroom also has a modern fitted sink.

In a second grade class of twenty-two children, there are two black children and three Asian

children. Again, there is a sink and a computer. A sixth grade social studies class has only one black child. The children have an in-class research area that holds some up-to-date resources. A set of encyclopedias (World Book, 1985) is in a rack beside a window. The children are doing a Spanish language lesson when I enter. Foreign languages begin in sixth grade at the school, but Spanish is offered also to the kindergarten children. As in every room at P.S. 24, the window shades are clean and new, the floor is neatly tiled in gray and green, and there is not a single light bulb missing.

Walking next into a special class, I see twelve children. One is white. Eleven are black. There are no Asian children. The room is half the size of mainstream classrooms. “Because of overcrowding,” says the principal, “we have had to split these rooms in half.” There is no computer and no sink.

I enter another special class. Of seven children, five are black, one is Hispanic, one is white. A little black boy with a large head sits in the far corner and is gazing at the ceiling.

“Placement of these kids,” the principal explains, “can usually be traced to neurological damage.”

In my notes: “How could so many of these children be brain-damaged?”

Next door to the special class is a woodworking shop. “This shop is only for the special classes,” says the principal. The children learn to punch in time cards at the door, he says, in order to prepare them for employment.

The fourth grade gifted class, in which I spend the last part of the day, is humming with excitement. “I start with these children in the first grade,” says the teacher. “We pull them out of mainstream classes on the basis of their test results and other factors such as the opinion of their teachers. Out of this group, beginning in third grade, I pull out the ones who show the most potential, and they enter classes such as this one.”

The curriculum they follow, she explains, “emphasizes critical thinking, reasoning and logic.” The planetarium, for instance, is employed not simply for the study of the universe as it exists.

“Children also are designing their own galaxies,” the teacher says.

A little girl sitting around a table with her classmates speaks with perfect poise: “My name is Susan. We are in the fourth grade gifted program.”

I ask them what they’re doing and a child says, “My name is Laurie and we’re doing problem-solving.”

A rather tall, good-natured boy who is half-standing at the table tells me that his name is David. “One thing that we do,” he says, “is logical thinking. Some problems, we find, have more than one good answer. We need to learn not simply to be logical in our own thinking but to show respect for someone else’s logic even when an answer may be technically incorrect.”

When I ask him to explain this, he goes on, “A person who gives an answer that is not ‘correct’ may nonetheless have done some interesting thinking that we should examine. ‘Wrong’ answers may be more useful to examine than correct ones.”

I ask the children if reasoning and logic are innate or if they’re things that you can learn.

“You know some things to start with when you enter school,” Susan says. “But we also learn some things that other children don’t.”

I ask her to explain this.

“We know certain things that other kids don’t know because we’re *taught* them.”

CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. In principle, what should our schools do for all children?
2. Point to specific differences in schools that Kozol claims amount to “savage inequalities.” Do you agree with his argument that schools stack the deck against poor children?
3. What about parents who claim they have earned the right to give their children whatever privileges they can afford to? Would you support a government-imposed equal-funding rule to give children in every neighborhood roughly the same quality of schooling?