

# Schools without Beauty

## What message are we sending kids when their classrooms are an “insult to aesthetics”?

BY JONATHAN KOZOL

ONE DAY WHEN I WAS TEACHING FOURTH grade in the Boston schools in the 1960s, I gave my students an assignment for which I was later criticized by one of the supervising personnel. These were the children who had had 12 substitute teachers in the months before the principal removed me from my other fourth grade class, the one that I was teaching in the auditorium, and sent me into this room for the months that still remained before the end of school.

The assignment I gave them was to describe for me in writing what they saw in front of them each day when they came into school, what they liked and did not like in the class, or in the school, and how they felt in general about the situation in which they and I now found ourselves. Because of their limited writing skills, I told them I would not be looking at their spelling and grammar at the start but would be looking for the vividness of details in their papers and the openness with which they would put down their own most private thoughts.

“In my school,” began a paper that was handed back to me a few days later, “I see dirty boards and I see papers on the floor. I see an old browken window with a sign on it saying, Do not unlock this window are browken. And I see cracks in the walls and I see old books with ink poured all over them and I see old painting hanging on the walls. I see old alfurbet letter hanging on one nail on the wall. I see a dirty fire exit I see a old closet with supplys for the class. I see pigeons flying all over the school. I see old freight trains throgh the fence of the school yard. I see pictures of contryies hanging on the wall and I see desks with wrighting all over the top of the desks and insited of the desk.”

Another child told me this: “I see lots of thinings in this room. I see new teachers omots every day. ... I don’t like the drity windows. And the dusty window shall-valls.”

This was another paper I was given: “I see pictures in my school ... I see arithmetic paper a spellings paper. I see a star chart. I see the flag of our Amerrica. The room is dirty ... The auditorium dirty the

seats are dusty. The light in the auditorium is brok. The curtains in the auditorium are ragged they took the curtains down because they was so ragged. The bathroom is dirty sometime the toilet is very hard. The cellar is dirty the hold school is dirty sometime. ... The flowers are dry every thing in my school is so so dirty.”

Many things have changed in inner-city schools since then—and some remain the same. Physical disrepair and squalor may not be as blatant in most districts now, although there are schools I visit where conditions are a good deal more offensive than the ones my students faithfully described. The child who said, “I see new teachers omots every day,” could have been speaking about any one of countless inner-city schools in the United States today. The insult to aesthetics, the affront to cleanliness and harmony and sweetness, are continuing realities as well for children who must go each morning into morbid-looking buildings in which few adults other than their teachers would agree to work day after day.

I have made a number of visits to a high school where a stream of water flowed down one of the main stairwells on a rainy afternoon and green fungus molds were growing in the office where the students went for counseling. A large blue barrel was positioned to collect rain-water coming through the ceiling. In one makeshift elementary school housed in a former skating rink next to a funeral parlor in another nearly all-black-and-Hispanic section of the Bronx, four kindergarten classes and a sixth-grade class were packed into a single room that had no windows. Airlessness was stifling in many rooms, and recess was impossible because there was no outdoor playground and no indoor gym, so the children had no place to play.

In another elementary school, which had been built to hold 1,000 children but was packed to bursting with some 1,500 boys and girls, the principal poured out his feelings to me in a room in which a plastic garbage bag had been attached somehow to cover part of the collapsing ceiling. “This,” he told me, pointing to the

garbage bag, then gesturing around him at the other indications of decay and disrepair one sees in ghetto schools much like it elsewhere, “would not happen to white children.”

There is no misery index for the children of apartheid education. There ought to be; we measure almost every other aspect of the lives they lead in school. Do kids who go to schools like these enjoy the days they spend in them? Is school, for most of them, a happy place to be? You do not find the answers to these questions in reports about achievement levels, scientific methods of accountability, or structural revisions in the modes of governance. Documents like these don’t speak of happiness. You have to go back to the schools themselves to find an answer to these questions. You have to sit down in the little chairs in first and second grade, or on the reading rug with kindergarten kids, and listen to the things they actually say to one another and the dialogue between them and their teachers. You have to go down to the basement with the children when it’s time for lunch and to the playground with them, if they have a playground, when it’s time for recess, if they still have recess at their school. You have to walk into the children’s bathrooms in these buildings. You have to do what children do and breathe the air the children breathe. I don’t think that there is any other way to find out what the lives that children lead in school are really like.

This nation can afford to give clean places and green spaces and, as one student put it in a letter to me, “fun places to play” to virtually every child in our public schools. That we refuse to do so, and continue to insist that our refusal can be justified by explanations such as insufficiency of funds and periodic “fiscal crises” and the like, depends upon a claim to penury to which a nation with our economic superfluity is not entitled. If we were forced to see these kids before our eyes each day, in all the fullness of their complicated and diverse and tenderly emerging personalities, as well as in their juvenile fragility, it would be harder to maintain this myth. Keeping them at a distance makes it easier.

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**Jonathan Kozol** is the National Book Award-winning author of *Death at an Early Age*, *Savage Inequalities*, and *Amazing Grace*. This essay is adapted from his latest book, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. Copyright © 2005 by Jonathan Kozol. Published by Crown Publishers, a division of Random House.