

Book Review
Fire in the Ashes:
Twenty-Five Years among the Poorest Children in America
by Jonathan Kozol
New York: Crown Publishers, 2012

Reviewed by AnnMarie Alberton Gunn
University of South Florida St. Petersburg

Jonathan Kozol's (2012) latest book, *Fire in the Ashes: Twenty-Five Years Among the Poorest Children in America*, provides a window into the lives of poor, mostly Black and Latino children, living in our wealthy nation. He makes us aware of the horrible circumstances, conditions, and schools which many poor children in our country endure. Jonathan Kozol met most of the children he writes about in the 1980s, when they were living in the Martinique Hotel, a rundown hotel in the South Bronx converted into a shelter for the homeless in New York. He has written about these children in several of his other works, *Rachel and Her Children* (1987), *Savage Inequalities* (1991), and *Shame of the Nation* (2005). It was upon his readers' request that Kozol (2012) wrote his latest book, *Fire in the Ashes*, to tell the stories of these children he met decades ago. With skilled guidance, preservice and in-service teachers can use this book to challenge many stereotypes about poor and minority children.

Kozol divides this book into two parts. The first, "The Shadow of the Past," tells us the stories of children who do not survive the numerous assaults to their humanity and well-being. The second, "A Bright Shining Light," shows us the remarkable good fortune of children who not only survive, but thrive. In both of these sections, there is a complex mixture of duress and success, despair and resilience. In this book review, I synthesize

AnnMarie Alberton Gunn is an assistant professor in the College of Education at the University of South Florida Saint Petersburg, Saint Petersburg, Florida. Her e-mail address is gunn@usfsp.edu

both sections through my personal and professional lenses: as a parent, as a teacher educator, and as a citizen advocating for social justice.

As in previous books, Kozol continues to write about homeless shelters in New York where conditions are truly deplorable. He tells the stories of different children and their families facing situations that as a mother I cannot imagine. He relates shocking accounts of children and infants suffering from chronic colds, asthma, diarrhea, bronchitis, and chronic hunger. Kozol elaborates that it was the magnitude of “sickness, squalor, and immiseration” at the Martinique homeless shelter that he had never seen before (p. 4). He provides us with an empathic experience of parents feeling hopeless and suffering from depression, and tells the stories of the mothers who wept in front of him. One of the boys who Kozol interviews tells about a student in his class, “...this student, a fifteen-year-old girl, had been raped and strangled in the hallway of a building not far from her home....She was in advanced classes in school and a nice person. The newspapers said the building where the girl was murdered had been nearly vacant and had been infested with crack users” (p. 224). Kozol noted that in fact, murders and assaults on children and teenagers were not uncommon in this area.

As a teacher educator, I believe it is important to consider that the overwhelming majority of teachers in this country are White women, many of whom come from middle class backgrounds (Sleeter, 2001). By contrast, U.S. demographics show increasing levels of racial, linguistic, economic, and ethnic diversity across the nation, particularly in urban areas similar to New York City as described by Kozol. This cultural disparity and potential disconnect between who is teaching and who is being taught is an important issue to address in teacher education (Gunn, Bennett, Evans, Peterson, & Welsh, 2013). In order for preservice teachers to effectively teach all children, they need to understand the complexity of the overwhelming number of issues that children of poverty face in their lives outside the confines of the classroom. *Fire in the Ashes* provides its readers, and specifically many preservice teachers, a window through which to better understand the circumstances in which poor children live. As teacher educators, we need to facilitate explicit conversations with preservice teachers about the social, economic, and political factors that impact the institutions of education and the families they serve. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services states that in 2012 poverty thresholds for 48 states (Hawaii and Alaska’s guidelines differ) is set for a family of four making \$23,492 or less a year. The children and families in Kozol’s book are poor; the poorest of the poor. They represent a portion of the 21.9 percent of children in our country who live in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2011) and face poverty

related issues every day. This statistic is especially troubling because research indicates that children raised in poverty do not perform as well in school, undergo more abuse, are more likely to engage in delinquent acts, suffer more from physical and mental health related issues, and reside in unsafe areas with high crime and substandard living conditions (Seccombe, 2000).

As we follow the lives of the children (now adults) in Kozol's fourth book, again he brings to the forefront the academic environments available for children attending schools in poor neighborhoods as compared to those of children attending schools in middle or upper class communities. Many of the schools in these poor neighborhoods, "would have been shut down many years before if they had been serving a middle class community" (p. 217). Kozol talks about dismal buildings, and overwhelmed staff at schools. He describes a class waiting to each lunch for 50 minutes in the hallway until there was room for the students in the basement cafeteria. Upon finishing their lunch they went outside to run and play in their schoolyard which had no grass and cracked cement. Kozol called the schools in this area "disaster zones" (p. 313). Middle schools in in this area suffer inordinately lower academic achievement scores than the average achievement levels in the state of New York. Kozol describes one school in which only 11% of students have passing scores in English, another school in this area was only doing slightly better as reported by the New York City Department of Education. These statistics are dismal compared to the state of New York as a whole. The National Center for Education (2012) reports that 75% of New York eighth-grade students are at or above basic reading proficiency. Compounding these academic failure rates is the large number of principals and teachers who quit after teaching only a year or two in high poverty schools. Kozol notes that many principals and teachers have left the schools since he started visiting them and in 2002, one of the schools he visited had four different principals in that year alone. Research continues to suggest that students attending high poverty schools have less access to qualified teachers and this can be attributed to the fact that the greatest teacher attrition rates are found at high poverty schools. A common strategy for hiring candidates for these vacant, hard-to-staff positions is to hire non-credentialed teachers, with little preparation or to hire applicants from out of field placements with temporary certificates (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Strong, 2007). Thus, in schools serving high-poverty children and families, there is a continuing cycle of inequity that denies a high quality education to the most in need.

Fire in the Ashes makes a call to us as citizens advocating for social justice. Kozol tells the story of a Guatemalan father taking the dangerous

physical risks of crossing the Mexican-American border, as well as risks being arrested, so that he can be at his daughter's graduation. Throughout his book, he discusses children who grew up and died too early from drugs or suicide. *Fire in the Ashes* makes us aware of the homeless people in shelters who did not even have running water to bath, restrooms, living in drug infested government corrupt buildings. These vivid examples from *Fire in the Ashes* provide the reader with insight into the challenging poverty related issues these families were forced to face.

Throughout *Fire in the Ashes*, Kozol points to interventions from individuals and groups that helped these families. He tells the stories of the children who survive and explains that somewhere in their lives, someone intervened and advocated for them in a way that significantly changed their lives. Kozol provides several examples that illustrate this advocacy: the neighborhood priest who arranged for a student to attend an upper class boarding school; a religious group that sent one family to live in Montana and provided a home for them; Kozol's own foundation that provides support for some of these families by helping with a medical bills or rent before a family becomes homeless. However, when Kozol discusses the children (now adults) who survived, he states, "I need to emphasize again that all these children had unusual advantages. Someone intervened in every case..." (p. 303). In *Fire in the Ashes*, Kozol ties success to these "unusual advantages," the support of others, and support that was offered at a crucial time. These solutions could not be a recipe-for-success for children and families living in poverty, nor are these the kinds of solutions that would lead to systemic reform and social justice. However, they suggest the types of supports that may enable some children and some families to overcome the negative odds associated with their situations.

As a parent, teacher educator, and citizen advocating for social justice, I was left wondering what suggestions Kozol would offer in order to effect system wide change? Given Kozol's education (he is a Harvard graduate), the impact of his work, and his lifetime commitment to children of poverty, I believe he falls short on providing us with his own analysis of the structures of power in our country. Only in the last 20 pages of the epilogue does Kozol paint, in broad strokes, his ideas for change that involve better funding for inner city, early childhood education programs, and increased school integration. However, based on the portrait of poverty Kozol vividly communicates in *Fire in the Ashes*, we understand that there are multiple social, economic, health, and political barriers to equitable education that must be addressed. Focusing on school issues alone will not resolve these problems.

I believe Kozol hopes to ignite advocacy efforts from all of his readers.

For teacher educators, I believe *Fire in the Ashes* can be used as a powerful tool to engage our colleagues and preservice and in-service teachers in “courageous conversations” (Singleton & Linton, 2006) about children living in poverty and social action efforts that can be developed.

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