

Sophia Barro

Heather Johnson

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Between Hunger and Privilege: How My Education Shaped My View of Inequality

From a young age, I came to understand that education wasn't the great equalizer that it's often portrayed as. My childhood unfolded between two vastly different towns within the same district: Silver Spring, where nearly half of my classmates relied on free or reduced meals (FARMS), and later Bethesda, where resources were abundant and financial struggles seemed almost nonexistent. The stark contrast between these two communities shaped my understanding of inequality and the limitations of educational opportunities. This dual experience gave me an intimate understanding of how deeply inequality is embedded in the American education system. In *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol references former U.S. Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel, who argues that "a caste society...violates the style of American democracy." Keppel critiques the nation's failure to provide truly public education, stating that "it has permitted what is in effect a private school system to develop under public auspices," making "equality of educational opportunity...more a myth than a reality" (Kozol, 80). Having witnessed firsthand the stark disparities between schools that were supposed to provide the same foundation for every child, I came to understand how inequality shapes educational experiences, even when students technically belong to the same district.

Keppel's use of the term *caste society* is crucial in understanding the depth of educational inequality in America. A caste society is one in which people's social status is predetermined by birth, with little to no mobility between classes. It is a hierarchical system that keeps certain groups at the top while confining others to the bottom, regardless of individual ability or merit. The fact that the U.S. education system functions this way exposes the contradiction at the heart of American democracy: we claim to believe in equal opportunity, yet we maintain a structure that denies it to millions of children. This reality is deeply tied to the sociological concept of marginality, which describes the position of individuals or groups who exist on the periphery of dominant social, economic, and political institutions. Students in underfunded districts are not just disadvantaged, they occupy a position within the education system itself, where they are technically included but lack the full benefits and opportunities available to their wealthier counterparts. Kozol highlights this disparity in Chapter two: *Other People's Children* in *Savage Inequalities* by contrasting the experiences of students in Chicago's public schools, particularly between North Lawndale and Winnetka. In the affluent neighborhood of Winnetka, students benefit from abundant resources, highly qualified teachers, and well-maintained facilities. In stark contrast, students in North Lawndale, an economically and socially isolated community, attend overcrowded schools with outdated materials and minimal investment, where the path to success is an uphill struggle. In these schools, students are trapped in conditions that all but guarantee their futures will mirror those of their parents, reinforcing generational cycles of poverty and marginality. They are physically present in the same education system as students in wealthy districts, but they exist in a vastly different reality, one where their potential is systematically restricted, their aspirations diminished, and their upward mobility stifled.

Kozol's depiction of Chicago's schools resonates with my own experiences in kindergarten through fifth grade in Silver Spring. I remember being in first grade, watching as staff handed out breakfast to students who hadn't eaten at home. The process wasn't hidden or discreet, it was simply

routine, almost ritualistic, as if making sure no child went hungry was just another part of the school day. Some kids took their meals quickly, grateful for the warm pancakes and milk. Others hesitated, shame flickering across their faces before accepting the food they needed to make it through the day. I didn't realize it then, but this was an early lesson in how poverty was managed rather than eradicated. For many, school was not just a place of learning; it was a lifeline. At the end of the day, I watched as students quietly slipped boxes of packaged ingredients and food into their backpacks. The school secretary handed them out, fully aware that these supplies would have to sustain their families through the weekend. Even at six years old, I understood, some of us carried more than just school books on our backs.

This experience was in stark contrast to my 6th through 12th grade experience in Bethesda, where students complained about the quality of food in the cafeteria and where school-sponsored trips to amusement parks and the Dominican Republic were considered routine. There, the idea of hunger was abstract, something discussed in service projects rather than lived reality. The quality of education reflected these economic divides. The classrooms in Silver Spring were overcrowded, teachers overworked, and our resources stretched thin. In Bethesda, the libraries were vast, the technology state-of-the-art, and the assumption was that every student would go to college, if not a top 50 institution. It was in these two settings that I saw how education does not erase inequality, it maintains it. The very structure of the system ensured that children in underfunded districts would remain marginalized, that their struggles would be cyclical, while wealthier students were given every advantage to succeed. Chicago's schools, as Kozol describes, exist in a state of perpetual neglect, much like the schools I attended in Silver Spring. He details crumbling buildings, outdated textbooks, disproportionate rates of dropout, and students who internalize the message that they are worth less than their suburban counterparts. This mirrors the caste-like nature of the American education system, where underprivileged students are resigned to conditions that limit their futures, while wealthier students, by virtue of their circumstances, are granted access to the best resources, teachers, and opportunities. The notion that

education is the great equalizer crumbles when faced with these realities. If we truly believed in meritocracy, then the students at Du Sable High would receive the same quality of education as those at New Trier High. But they don't. And that is by design.

This divide did not simply exist in resources but in expectations. In Silver Spring, I saw teachers do their best with what little they had, but even they understood the limits placed on their students. The focus was often on keeping up rather than excelling. Many of my classmates during my K-5 experience carried responsibilities beyond their years, translating for their parents at appointments or caring for younger siblings. Education, for them, was just one priority among many. In Bethesda, however, success was assumed. Parents hired private tutors, students enrolled in SAT prep courses, and the question was not whether we would attend college, but which elite institution we would choose. These differences were not the result of individual effort or intelligence but of a system that funneled opportunities to some while rationing them for others. Even after moving to Bethesda, I could not ignore the disparities. Playing sports, we often had games against teams from public high schools in Silver Spring. I saw their fields, patches of dirt where grass struggled to grow, goalposts that leaned slightly to the side, locker rooms with broken benches and dim lighting. Their schools, too, told a story. Windows in need of repair, outdated facilities, and a noticeable lack of resources. I would step off our buses, dressed in new uniforms funded by our booster programs, and look at the difference in our realities. The contrast was glaring. It was not just about skill or determination; it was about access. The inequities were visible before the game even began.

The impact of this divide on my life trajectory has been eye-opening. In Silver Spring, I learned awareness. I saw firsthand that survival wasn't guaranteed and that education alone wasn't enough to overcome structural barriers. But in Bethesda, I learned confidence. I saw what access truly looked like

and understood what it meant to be in a system that assumed your success, rather than questioning it. I also learned to voice the concerns I had about the school system. This duality has shaped me in ways I'm still unpacking. I exist in both spaces, I understand the coded language of privilege, yet I cannot forget the faces of the children who went home with boxes of food, hoping it would be enough.

The American education system operates as a public institution only in name; in practice, it functions as a private one, where wealth dictates the quality of education a child receives. The marginalization of students in low-income districts is not accidental; it is the product of policies and funding structures that maintain social hierarchies rather than dismantling them. My education was never just about me; it was about the structure that determined my opportunities, about the systems that reinforced inequality while pretending to offer meritocracy. The truth is, I would not be at my final semester at Lehigh today if I had not attended Bethesda Chevy Chase High School. The advanced coursework, the well-funded college prep programs, and the expectation that students would pursue higher education all played a role in getting me here. I often wonder if I had stayed in Silver Spring and attended Northwood High School or John F. Kennedy, would I have had the same access to opportunities, the same level of preparation, or even the same confidence that I belonged at an institution like this? Understanding this has made me both hopeful and deeply critical. I know that social change is possible, but I also know that it will not come easily. My experiences have made me question who education is truly meant to serve and how long we will continue to accept a system where zip codes determine futures. As I move forward, I carry with me both the lessons of scarcity and the privileges of access. I have seen both worlds, and I refuse to forget either. Because in the end, my education was never just about academics, it was about learning the truth of the society I live in and deciding what role I will play in shaping its future.