CHAPTER 2

Hitting Them Hardest When They're Small

"Dear Mr. Kozol," said the eight-year-old, "we do not have the things you have. You have Clean things. We do not have. You have a clean bathroom. We do not have that. You have Parks and we do not have Parks. You have all the thing and we do not have all the thing. . . . Can you help us?"

The letter, from a child named Alliyah, came in a fat envelope of 27 letters from a class of third grade children in the Bronx. Other letters that the students in Alliyah's classroom sent me registered some of the same complaints. "We don't have no gardens," and "no Music or Art," and "no fun places to play," one child said. "Is there a way to fix this Problem?" Another noted a concern one hears from many children in such overcrowded schools: "We have a gym but it is for lining up. I think it is not fair." Yet another of Alliyah's classmates asked me, with a sweet misspelling, if I knew the way to make her school into a "good"

school—"like the other kings have"—and ended with the hope that I would do my best to make it possible for "all the kings" to have good schools.

The letter that affected me the most, however, had been written by a child named Elizabeth. "It is not fair that other kids have a garden and new things. But we don't have that," said Elizabeth. "I wish that this school was the most beautiful school in the whole why world."

Elizabeth had very careful, very small, and neatly formed handwriting. She had corrected other errors in her letter, squeezing in a missing letter she'd initially forgotten, erasing and rewriting a few words she had misspelled. The error she had left unaltered in the final sentence therefore captured my attention more than it might otherwise have done.

"The whole why world" stayed in my thoughts for days. When I later met Elizabeth I brought her letter with me, thinking I might see whether, in reading it aloud, she'd change the "why" to "wide" or leave it as it was. My visit to her class, however, proved to be so pleasant, and the children seemed so eager to bombard me with their questions about where I lived, and why I lived there rather than New York, and who I lived with, and how many dogs I had, and other interesting questions of that sort, that I decided not to interrupt the nice reception they had given me with questions about usages and spelling. I left "the whole why world" to float around unedited and unrevised within my mind. The letter itself soon found a resting place up on the wall above my desk.

In the years before I met Elizabeth, I had visited many elementary schools in the South Bronx and in one northern district of the Bronx as well. I had also 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 where 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 make-shift elementary school housed in a former skating rink next to a funeral parlor in another nearly all-black-and-Hispanic section of the Bronx, class size rose to 34 and more; 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."

A friend of mine who was a first-year teacher in a Harlem high school told me she had 40 students in her class but only 30 chairs, so some of her students had to sit on windowsills or lean against the walls. Other high schools were so crowded they were forced to shorten schooldays and to cut back hours of instruction to accommodate a double shift of pupils. Tens of thousands of black and Hispanic students were in schools like these, in which half the student body started classes very early in the morning and departed just before or after lunch, while the other half did not begin their schoolday until noon.

Libraries, once one of the glories of the New York City system, were either nonexistent or, at best, vestigial in large

numbers of the elementary schools. Art and music programs had for the most part disappeared as well. "When I began to teach in 1969," the principal of an elementary school in the South Bronx reported to me, "every school had a full-time licensed art and music teacher and librarian." During the next decade, he recalled, "I saw all of that destroyed."

School physicians were also removed from elementary schools during these years. In 1970, when substantial numbers of white children still attended New York City's schools, 400 doctors had been present to address the health needs of the children. By 1993, the number of doctors had been cut to 23, most of them part-time—a cutback that affected most acutely children in the city's poorest neighborhoods where medical provision was perennially substandard and health problems faced by children most extreme. During the 1990s, for example, the rate of pediatric asthma in the South Bronx, already one of the highest in the nation, was exacerbated when the city chose to build a medical waste incinerator in their neighborhood after a plan to build it on the East Side of Manhattan was abandoned in the face of protests from the parents of that area. Hospitalization rates for these asthmatic children in the Bronx were as much as 20 times more frequent than for children in the city's affluent communities. Teachers spoke of children who came into class with chronic wheezing and, at any moment of the day, might undergo more serious attacks, but in the schools I visited there were no doctors to attend to them.

Political leaders in New York tended to point to shifting economic factors, such as a serious budget crisis in the middle 1970s, rather than to the changing racial demographics of the student population, as the explanation for these steep declines in services. But the fact of economic ups and downs from year to year, or from one decade to

the next, could not convincingly explain the permanent shortchanging of the city's students, which took place routinely in good economic times and bad, with bad times seized upon politically to justify these cuts while, in the good times, losses undergone during the crisis years had never been restored.

"If you close your eyes to the changing racial composition of the schools and look only at budget actions and political events," says Noreen Connell, the director of the nonprofit Educational Priorities Panel in New York, "you're missing the assumptions that are underlying these decisions." When minority parents ask for something better for their kids, she says, "the assumption is that these are parents who can be discounted. These are kids that we don't value."

The disrepair and overcrowding of these schools in the South Bronx "wouldn't happen for a moment in a white suburban school district like Scarsdale," says former New York State Commissioner of Education Thomas Sobol, who was once the superintendent of the Scarsdale schools and is now a professor of education at Teachers College in New York. "I'm aware that I could never prove that race is at the heart of this if I were called to testify before a legislative hearing. But I've felt it for so long, and seen it operating for so long, I know it's true. . . ."

During the 1990s, physical conditions in some buildings had become so dangerous that a principal at one Bronx school, which had been condemned in 1989 but nonetheless continued to be used, was forced to order that the building's windows not be cleaned because the frames were rotted and glass panes were falling in the street, while at another school the principal had to have the windows bolted shut for the same reason. These were not years of economic crisis in New York. This was a period in which financial markets soared and a new generation of

free-spending millionaires and billionaires was widely celebrated by the press and on TV; but none of the proceeds of this period of economic growth had found their way into the schools that served the truly poor.

I had, as I have noted, visited many schools in other cities by this time; but I did not know children in those schools as closely as I'd come to know, or soon would know, so many of the children in the New York City schools. So it would be these children, and especially the ones in elementary schools in which I spent the most time in the Bronx, whose sensibilities and puzzlements and understandings would impress themselves most deeply on my own impressions in the years to come, and it would be their questions that became my questions and their accusations and their challenges, when it appeared that they were making challenges, that came to be my own.

This, then, is the accusation that Alliyah and her classmates send our way: "You have. . . . We do not have." Are they right or are they wrong? Is this a case of naïve and simplistic juvenile exaggeration? What does a third grader know about these big-time questions about what is fair and what is not, and what is right and what is wrong? Physical appearances apart, how in any case do you begin to measure something so diffuse and vast and seemingly abstract as having more, or having less, or having not at all?

In a social order where it seems a fairly common matter to believe that what we spend to purchase almost anything we need bears some connection to the worth of what we get, a look at what we think it's in our interest to invest in children like Alliyah or Pineapple may not tell us everything we need to know about the state of educational fair play within our nation, but it surely tells us *something* about what we think these kids are worth to us in human terms and in the contributions they may someday make to our society. At the time I met Alliyah in the school-year 1997–

1998, New York's Board of Education spent about $8,000 yearly on the education of a third grade child in a New York City public school. If you could have scooped Alliyah up out of the neighborhood where she was born and plunked her down within a fairly typical white suburb of New York, she would have received a public education worth about $12,000 every year. If you were to lift her up once more and set her down within one of the wealthiest white suburbs of New York, she would have received as much as $18,000 worth of public education every year and would likely have had a third grade teacher paid approximately $30,000 more than was her teacher in the Bronx.

The dollars on both sides of the equation have increased since then, but the discrepancies between them have not greatly changed. The present per-pupil spending level in the New York City schools is $11,700, which may be compared to a per-pupil spending level in excess of $22,000 in the well-to-do suburban district of Manhasset. The present New York City level is, indeed, almost exactly what Manhasset spent per pupil 18 years ago, in 1987, when that sum of money bought a great deal more in services and salaries than it can buy today. In dollars adjusted for inflation, New York City has not yet caught up to where its wealthiest suburbs were a quarter-century ago.

Gross discrepancies in teacher salaries between the city and its affluent white suburbs have remained persistent too. In 1997, the median salary for teachers in Alliyah's neighborhood was $43,000, as compared to $74,000 in suburban Rye, $77,000 in Manhasset, and $81,000 in the town of Scarsdale, which is only about 11 miles from Alliyah's school. Five years later, in 2002, salary scales for New York City's teachers rose to levels that approximated those within the lower-spending districts in the suburbs, but salary scales do not reflect the actual salaries that teachers typically receive, which are dependant upon years of

service and advanced degrees. Salaries for first-year teachers in the city now were higher than they'd been four years before, but the differences in median pay between the city and its upper-middle-income suburbs had remained extreme. The overall figure for New York City in 2002–2003 was $53,000, while it had climbed to $87,000 in Manhassett and exceeded $95,000 in Scarsdale.

Even these numbers that compare the city to its suburbs cannot give an adequate impression of the inequalities imposed upon the children living in poor sections of New York. For, even within the New York City schools themselves, there are additional discrepancies in funding between schools that serve the poorest and the wealthiest communities, since teachers with the least seniority and least experience are commonly assigned to schools in the most deeply segregated neighborhoods. The median salary of teachers in Pineapple's neighborhood was less than $46,000 in 2002–2003, the lowest in the city, compared to $59,000 in one of Manhattan's recently gentrified communities, and up to $64,000 in some neighborhoods of Queens.

None of this includes the additional resources given to the public schools in affluent communities where parents have the means to supplement the public funds with private funding of their own, money used to build and stock a good school library for instance, or to arrange for art and music lessons or, in many of these neighborhoods, to hire extra teachers to reduce the size of classes for their children.

This relatively new phenomenon of private money being used selectively to benefit the children only of specific public schools had not been noted widely in New York until about ten years ago when parents of the students at a public school in Greenwich Village in Manhattan raised the funds to pay a fourth grade teacher, outside of the normal budget of the school, when class size in the fourth grade otherwise was likely to increase from 26 to

32, which was the average class size in the district at the time but which, one of the parents said, "would have a devastating impact" on her son. The parents, therefore, collected $46,000—two thirds of it, remarkably, in just one night—in order to retain the extra teacher.

The school in Greenwich Village served a population in which less than 20 percent of students were from families of low income, a very low figure in New York, compared, for instance, to Pineapple's neighborhood, where 95 percent of children lived in poverty. The Greenwich Village school, moreover, was already raising a great deal of private money—more than $100,000 yearly, it was now revealed—to pay for music, art, and science programs and for furniture repairs.

The chancellor of the New York City schools initially rejected the use of private funds to underwrite a teacher's pay, making the argument that this was not fair to the children in those many other schools that had much larger classes; but the district later somehow came up with the public funds to meet the cost of hiring the extra teacher, so the parents won their children the advantage they had sought for them in any case.

As it turned out, the use of private subsidies to supplement the tax-supported budgets of some schools in affluent communities was a more commonly accepted practice than most people in the city's poorest neighborhoods had known. The PTA at one school on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, for example, had been raising nearly $50,000 yearly to hire a writing teacher and two part-time music teachers. At a school in a middle-class section of Park Slope in Brooklyn, parents raised more than $100,000 yearly to employ a science teacher and two art instructors. In yet another neighborhood, parents at an elementary school and junior high had raised more than $1 million, mostly for enrichment programs for their children.

In principle, the parents in poor neighborhoods were free to do fund-raising too, but the proceeds they were likely to bring in differed dramatically. The PTA in one low-income immigrant community, for instance, which sponsored activities like candy sales and tried without success to win foundation grants, was able to raise less than $4,000. In the same year, parents at P.S. 6, a top-rated elementary school serving the Upper East Side of Manhattan, raised $200,000. The solicitation of private funds from parents in communities like this had come to be so common, said the president of the New York City Board of Education, "you almost expect a notice from the schools saying there's going to be tuition." A good deal of private money, moreover, as The Times observed, was "being collected under the table" because parents sometimes feared that they would otherwise be forced to share these funds with other schools. "We can do it," said the leader of the parent group at one of the schools where lavish sums of private money had been raised, "but it is sad that other schools that don't have a richer parent body can't. It really does make it a question of haves and have-nots."

In view of the extensive coverage of this new phenomenon not only by New York City papers but by those in other cities where the same trends are observed, it is apparent that this second layer of disparities between the children of the wealthy and the children of the poor is no secret to the public any longer. Yet, even while they sometimes are officially deplored, these added forms of inequality have been accepted with apparent equanimity by those who are their beneficiaries.

"Inequality is not an intentional thing," said the leader of the PTA in one of the West Side neighborhoods where parents had been raising private funds, some of which had been obtained as charitable grants. "You have schools that are empowered and you have schools that have no power

at all. . . . I don't bear any guilt for knowing how to write a grant," he said, a statement that undoubtedly made sense to some but skirted the entire issue of endemic underbudgeting of public schools attended by the children of poor people who did not enjoy his money-raising skills or possible connections to grant makers.

A narrowing of civic virtue to the borders of distinct and self-contained communities is now evolving in these hybrid institutions which are public schools in that they benefit from the receipt of public funds but private in the many supplementary programs that are purchased independently. Boutique schools within an otherwise impoverished system, they enable parents of the middle class and upper middle class to claim allegiance to the general idea of public schools while making sure their children do not suffer gravely for the stripped-down budgets that have done great damage to poor children like Alliyah and Pineapple.

"There are cheap children and there are expensive children," writes Marina Warner, an essayist and novelist who has written many books for children, "just as there are cheap women and expensive women." When Pineapple entered P.S. 65 in the South Bronx, the government of New York State had already placed a price tag on her forehead. She and her kindergarten classmates were $8,000 babies. If we had wanted to see an $18,000 baby, we would have had to drive into the suburbs. But the governmentally administered diminishment of value in the children of the poor begins even before the age of five or six when they begin their years of formal education in the public schools. It starts during their infant years and toddler years when hundreds of thousands of children in low-income neighborhoods are locked out of the opportunity for preschool education for no reason but the accident of birth

and budgetary choices of the government, while children of the privileged are often given veritable feasts of rich developmental early education.

In New York City, for example, affluent parents pay surprisingly large sums of money to enroll their youngsters in extraordinary early-education programs, typically beginning at the age of two or three, that give them social competence and rudimentary pedagogic skills unknown to children of the same age in the city's poorer neighborhoods. The most exclusive of the private preschools in New York, which are known to those who can afford them as the "Baby Ivies," cost as much as $22,000 for a full-day program. Competition for admission to these pre-K schools is so intense that "private counselors" are frequently retained, at fees as high as $300 hourly, according to The Times, to guide the parents through the application process.

At the opposite extreme along the economic spectrum in New York are thousands of children who receive no preschool opportunity at all. Exactly how *many* thousands is almost impossible to know. Numbers that originate in governmental agencies in New York and other states are incomplete and imprecise and do not always differentiate with clarity between authentic pre-K programs that have educative and developmental substance and those less expensive childcare arrangements that do not. But even where states do compile numbers that refer specifically to educative preschool programs, it is difficult to know how many of the children who are served are of low income since admissions to some of the state-supported programs aren't determined by low income or they are determined by a complicated set of factors of which poverty is only one.

There is another way, however, to obtain a fairly vivid sense of what impoverished four-year-olds receive in segregated sections of our cities like the Bronx. This is by asking kids themselves while you are with them in a kindergarten

class to tell you how they spent their time the year before—or, if the children get confused or are too shy to give you a clear answer, then by asking the same question to their teacher.

"How many of these children were in pre-K programs last year or the last two years?" I often ask a kindergarten teacher.

In middle- and upper-class suburbs, a familiar answer is "more than three quarters of them," "this year, almost all of them," or "virtually all. . . ." In poor urban neighborhoods, by comparison, what I more often hear is "only a handful," "possibly as many as a fourth," "maybe about a third of them got *something* for one year. . . ." The superintendent of the district that includes Pineapple's former school estimated in the fall of 2002 that only between a quarter and a third of children in the district had received even a single year of preschool and that less than five percent had been provided with the two years of pre-K instruction that are common in most affluent communities.

Government data and the estimates of independent agencies tend to substantiate the estimates of principals and teachers. Of approximately 250,000 four-year-olds in New York State in 2001–2002, only about 25 percent, some 60,000, were believed to be enrolled in the state-funded preschool program—which is known as "Universal Pre-K" nonetheless—and typically in two-and-a-half-hour sessions rather than the more extended programs children of middle-class families usually attend. Then too, because these figures were not broken down by family income levels and because the program did not give priority to children of low income, it was difficult to know how many children in the poorest neighborhoods had been excluded from the program.

Head Start, which is a federal program, is of course

much better known than New York's Universal Pre-K and it has a long track-record, having been created 40 years ago by Congress at a time when social programs that expanded opportunities for children of low income were not viewed with the same skepticism that is common among many people who set public policy today. In spite of the generally high level of approval Head Start has received over the years, whether for its academic benefits or for its social benefits, or both, 40 percent of three- and four-year-olds who qualified for Head Start by their parents' income were denied this opportunity in 2001, a percentage of exclusion that has risen steeply in the subsequent four years. In some of the major cities, where the need is greatest, only a tiny fraction of low-income children in this age bracket are served. In New York City, for example, less than 13,000 four-year-olds were served by Head Start in 2001; and, in many cases, Head Start was combined with Universal Pre-K, so the children served by Head Start on its own were relatively few.

There are exceptions to this pattern in some sections of the nation. In Milwaukee, for example, nearly every four-year-old is now enrolled in a preliminary kindergarten program, which amounts to a full year of all-day preschool education, prior to a second kindergarten year for five-year-olds, according to the superintendent of Milwaukee's schools. In New Jersey, full-day pre-K programs have been instituted for all three- and four-year-olds in 31 low-income districts, one of the consequences of a legal action to reduce inequities of education in that state. More commonly in urban neighborhoods, large numbers of children have received no preschool education and they come into their kindergarten year without the minimal social skills that children need in order to participate in class activities and without even such very modest early-learning skills as knowing how to hold a pencil, identify perhaps a couple of

shapes or colors, or recognize that printed pages go from left to right. A first grade teacher in Boston pointed out a child in her class who had received no preschool and, as I recall, had missed much of his kindergarten year as well, and introduced me to the boy so I could sit beside him for a while and derive my own conclusions, then confirmed my first impression when she told me in a whisper, "He's a sweetheart of a baby but knows almost absolutely nothing about anything that has to do with school!"

Two years later, in third grade, these children are introduced to what are known as "high-stakes tests," which in many urban systems now determine whether students can or cannot be promoted. Children who have been in programs like the "Baby Ivies" since the age of two have been given seven years of education by this point, nearly twice as many as the children who have been denied these opportunities; yet all are required to take, and will be measured and in many cases penalized severely by, the same examinations.

Which of these children will receive the highest scores—those who spent the years from two to four in lovely little Montessori schools and other pastel-painted settings in which tender and attentive grown-ups read to them from storybooks and introduced them for the first time to the world of numbers, and the shapes of letters, and the sizes and varieties of solid objects, and perhaps taught them to sort things into groups or to arrange them in a sequence, or to do those many other interesting things that early-childhood specialists refer to as prenumeracy skills, or the ones who spent those years at home in front of a TV or sitting by the window of a slum apartment gazing down into the street? There is something deeply hypocritical in a society that holds an inner-city child only eight years old "accountable" for her performance on a high-stakes standardized exam but does not hold the high officials of our government

accountable for robbing her of what they gave their own kids six or seven years before.

There are obviously other forces that affect the early school performance of low-income children: levels of parent education, social instability, and frequently undiagnosed depression and anxiety that make it hard for many parents I have known to take an active role in backing up the efforts of their children's teachers in the public schools. Still, it is all too easy to assign the primary onus of responsibility to parents in these neighborhoods. (Where were these parents educated after all? Usually in the same low-ranking schools their children now attend.) In a nation in which fairness was respected, children of the poorest and least educated mothers would receive the most extensive and most costly preschool preparation, not the least and cheapest, because children in these families need it so much more than those whose educated parents can deliver the same benefits of early learning to them in their homes.

The "Baby Ivies" of Manhattan are not public institutions and receive no subsidies from public funds. In a number of cities, on the other hand, even this last line of squeamishness has now been crossed and public funds are being used to underwrite part of the costs of preschool education for the children of the middle class in public institutions which, however, do not offer the same services to children of the poor. Starting in spring 2001, Chicago's public schools began to operate a special track of preschool for the children of those families who were able to afford to pay an extra fee—nearly $6,000—to provide their children with a full-day program of about 11 hours, starting at the age of two if parents so desired. In a city where 87 percent of students in the public schools were black or Hispanic, the pay-for-preschool program served primarily white children.

Almost all these preschools were "in gentrified or gentrifying neighborhoods," The Chicago Tribune reported. "The fresh paint and new toys" in one of these programs on the North Side of Chicago were not there simply "to make preschool a happier place for the new class of toddlers" but "to keep their parents from moving to the suburbs." These and other "gold-plated academic offerings" which the city was underwriting to attract or to retain the children of the middle class had already begun to slow the "brain drain" from the public schools, The Tribune said. In the same year in which the pay-for-pre-K program was begun, 7,000 children from low-income families, many of whom were deemed to be "at risk," were waiting for preschool spaces that the city was unable to provide.

Undemocratic practices like these, no matter how strategically compelling they may seem, have introduced a radical distorting prism to an old, if seldom honored, national ideal of universal public education that affords all children equal opportunity within the borders of a democratic entity. Blurring the line between democracy and marketplace, the private subsidy of public schools in privileged communities denounces an ideal of simple justice that is often treated nowadays as an annoying residue of tiresome egalitarian ideas, an ethical detritus that sophisticated parents are encouraged to shut out of mind as they adapt themselves to a new order of Darwinian entitlements.

"We wouldn't play Little League this way," a parent in a wealthy district in Ohio told me when she was reflecting on the inequalities of education funding in that state. "We'd be embarrassed. We would feel ashamed." Perhaps in order to deflect these recognitions, or to soften them somewhat, many people, even while they do not doubt the worth of

making very large investments in the education and the preschool education of their children, somehow—paradoxical as it may seem—appear to be attracted to the argument that money may not really matter that much after all.

No matter with what regularity such doubts about the worth of spending money on a child's education are advanced, it is obvious that those who *have* the money, and who spend it lavishly to benefit their own kids, do not do so for no reason. "If it doesn't matter," said a black physician working in the Bronx about the parallel inequities in medical provision made for privileged white children on the one hand and for poor children of color on the other, "then cancel it for everybody. Don't give it to them, deny it to us, then ask us to believe it's not significant."

This is the persistent challenge that the advocates for children in severely underfunded districts pose to those who are disposed to hear; yet shockingly large numbers of well-educated and sophisticated people have been able to dismiss such challenges with a surprising ease. "Is the answer *really* to throw money into these dysfunctional and failing schools?" I'm often asked. "Don't we have some better ways to make them 'work'?" The question is posed in a variety of forms. "Yes, of course, it's not a perfectly fair system as it stands. But money alone is surely not the sole response. The values of the parents and the kids themselves must have a role in this as well. . . . Housing, health conditions, social factors"—"other factors" is a term of overall reprieve one often hears—"have got to be considered too. . . ." These latter points are obviously true but always seem to have the odd effect of substituting things we know we cannot change in the short run for obvious things like cutting class size and constructing new school buildings or providing universal preschool that we actually could do right now if we were so inclined.

Frequently these arguments are posed as questions

that do not invite an answer since the answer seems to be decided in advance. "Can you really buy your way to better education for these children?" "Do we know enough to be quite sure that we will see an actual return on the investment that we make?" "Is it even clear that this is the right starting-point to get to where we'd like to go? It doesn't always seem to work, as I am sure that you already know . . . ," or similar questions that somehow assume I will agree with those who ask them.

Some people who ask these questions, while they live in wealthy districts where the schools are funded at high levels, don't send their children to these public schools but choose instead to send them to expensive private day-schools. At some of the well-known private prep schools in the New York City area, tuition and associated costs are typically more than $20,000. In their children's teenage years they sometimes send them off to boarding schools like Andover or Exeter or Groton, where tuition, boarding, and additional expenses rise to more than $30,000. Often a family has two teenage children in these schools at the same time; so they may be spending over $60,000 on their children's education every year. Yet here I am one night, a guest within their home, and dinner has been served and we are having coffee now; and this entirely likable, and generally sensible, and beautifully refined and thoughtful person looks me in the eyes and asks me whether you can really buy your way to better education for the children of the poor.

Civility, of course, controls these situations. One rarely gets to give the answer one would like to give in social settings of this kind. And sometimes, too, the people who have asked these questions make it apparent, in an almost saddened afterthought, that they are not appeased entirely by the doubts they've raised, because before the evening's over and once every other argument is made

and the discussion at long last begins to wind down to its end, a concessionary comment seems to find its way into the conversation. "Well, that's how it is. . . . Life isn't fair. . . . We do the best we can, in other ways. . . ." Sometimes, then, a charitable activity is named. "Our daughter's private school insists that every student do a service project for one year. . . ." "They tutor children at an elementary school in one of the disadvantaged neighborhoods . . . ," or something else that's decent, philanthropic, and sincere like that, which smoothes the edges of the evening.

References to service programs, mentoring and tutoring and such, provide at least a hint of what fair-minded people often wish that they could do on a more comprehensive basis if the means for doing it did not seem so politically complex or threaten to exact too high a toll on their immediate self-interest. Most honest grown-ups, after all, do not really get a lot of solace out of saying that "life isn't fair," especially if they can see the ways they benefit from the unfairness they deplore. Most also understand that a considerably higher level of taxation for our public schools, if equitably allocated on the basis of real need, would make it possible for far more children from poor neighborhoods to enter the admissions pool for the distinguished colleges and universities their own children attend. Some of their children might encounter stiffer competition. Children like Pineapple and Alliyah might get in instead.

There are others, however, who appear to suffer no uneasiness at all about these contradictions and appear to be convinced—at least, it *sounds* as if they are—that money well-invested in the education of the children of their social class makes perfect sense while spending on the same scale for the children of the very poor achieves, at best, only some marginal results, or maybe none at all. "An equal society," President George W. Bush told the National Urban League in August of 2001, would begin with "equally

excellent schools." Simply increasing federal assistance to the public schools, however, had not been effective, he told his audience. It was, he said, like "pumping gas into a flooded engine," by which he seemed to mean that inner-city "engines" (schools) had too much gas (too many dollars) flooding them already.

It was an odd metaphor, I thought. It would have been fair to ask the president how schools like Phillips Academy in Exeter or Andover, the latter of which he had himself attended, were able to absorb some $30,000 yearly for each pupil without "flooding" their own engines. Did they have perhaps a bigger engine to begin with? Did the beautifully developed infrastructure of these schools permit them to deploy large sums of money more effectively than did the schools with rotting window frames and no school libraries? "I'll believe money doesn't count the day the rich stop spending so much on their own children," says former New York City principal Deborah Meier, who subsequently became the principal of an elementary school in Boston; but Mrs. Meier's commonsense reaction is resisted widely among those who are in power now in Washington.

It is sometimes claimed by those who share the president's beliefs that it is possible to point to certain urban districts in which annual per-pupil spending now approximates the levels found in some adjacent middle-class communities but that the children in these districts still do not perform at nearly the same levels as the children in these neighboring communities. Highly selective examples commonly are used to press this point; and the subsequent argument is made that these examples demonstrate "the limited effects" of higher levels of investment in the education of low-income children.

There are several reasons why I've never found this a convincing argument. First, it tends to obviate almost all recognition of the consequences of the previous decades of

low funding in these districts: the cumulative deficits in school construction and in infrastructure maintenance, for instance. It also ignores the deficits in preschool education and the effects of prior years of mediocre schooling on the educational levels of the parents of the children in these neighborhoods. Nor does it even contemplate the multiple effects of concentrated poverty and racial isolation in themselves.

Equitable funding levels under these conditions would not merely approximate the spending levels found in wealthier communities; they would far exceed them. And the benefits to be derived from equitable funding could not properly be measured on a short-term basis, since it would take many years before the consequences of so many prior years of organized shortchanging of the children, and their parents and grandparents, in a segregated district could be plausibly reversed. The examples of high-spending urban districts used to press the case against increasing our investment in poor children are, in any case, atypical. Nationwide, as we will document in detail in a later chapter, the differential in per-pupil spending between districts with the highest numbers of minority children and those with the fewest children of minorities amounts to more than $25,000 for a typical class in elementary school. In Illinois, the differential grows to $47,000, in New York to more than $50,000. From any point of elemental fairness, inequalities like these are unacceptable.

Those who search for signs of optimism often make the point that there are children who do not allow themselves to be demoralized by the conditions we have seen but do their work and keep their spirits high and often get good grades and seem, at least, to have a better chance than many of their peers to graduate from high school and

go on to college—and, in any case, whether they do or not, refuse to let themselves be broken or embittered by the circumstances they may face.

I have portrayed a number of such powerfully resilient children in my recent book about the South Bronx, Ordinary Resurrections, and in an earlier book titled Amazing Grace. Other writers have portrayed such children elsewhere. There are also academic studies that examine qualities of character in inner-city children who transcend the difficult conditions of their lives, stumble at times, face disappointment and discouragement, but nonetheless persist against the odds and ultimately manage to prevail.

Studies like these may give us valuable lessons about differences in individuals who can, or cannot, overcome adversities. Since all of us must face adversities, they are instructive to us also; and, besides, these studies generally highlight fascinating children who display the kinds of qualities that almost any grown-up would admire. But this—the luminosity of one, the moral toughness of another, the sheer high-jumping brilliance of a third, the kindly impulse sometimes of an affluent person from outside of their community to reward exceptionalities like these—ought not to afford us too much easy consolation for the structural inequities that make these victories so rare. We do not ask most children in America to summon up heroic qualities like these in order to prevail. They prevail and learn their lessons and, more frequently than not, enjoy the years they spend in public school, and usually have at least a reasonable chance of going on to college if they like, not because they represent miraculous exceptions to the norm among their peers, but as a matter of the ordinary expectations that are held for children in a middle-class or upper-middle-class community.

These expectations are not simply those, moreover,

that can be attributed to the ambitions and the value systems of the parents of these children but are rooted in demonstrable advantages in what their schools provide to them: experienced instructors, reasonably small classes, well-appointed libraries, plenty of computers with sophisticated software, at the secondary level often college-level history and literature and science programs, and extensive counseling facilities, as well as the aesthetic benefits of cheerful buildings and nice places to have lunch and, in a lot of secondary schools, lovely quadrangles and courtyards where the adolescents can relax and work with one another in small groups and, especially important for the younger children, green expansive spaces to go out and play at recess so that they return to class invigorated and refreshed.

This nation can afford to give clean places and green spaces and, as one of Alliyah's classmates put it, "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.

CHAPTER 3

The Ordering Regime

As racial isolation deepens and the inequalities of education finance remain unabated and take on new and more innovative forms, the principals of many inner-city schools are making choices that few principals in schools that serve suburban children ever need to contemplate. Unable to foresee a time when black and Hispanic students in large numbers will not go to segregated public schools and seeing little likelihood that schools like these will ever have the infrastructure and resources of successful white suburban schools, many have been dedicating vast amounts of time and effort to create an architecture of adaptive strategies that promise incremental gains within the limits inequality allows.

New vocabularies of stentorian determination, new systems of incentive and new modes of castigation, which are termed "rewards and sanctions," have emerged. Curriculum materials that are alleged to be aligned with governmentally