Chapter 9: Dreams
Summary and Questions by UAA Faculty Trish Jenkins

SUMMARY

Chapter 9, “Dreams,” makes the argument that the public education system fails to provide what Jonathan Kozol refers to as “the means of competition.” However, barriers to opportunity through education also arise from circumstances beyond the education system’s control.

Teachers face challenges because of the following:

- Combative parents, many of whom are quick to rely on aggressive methods of interacting, or uninvolved parents, many of whom may be unable to become involved given work obligations or other family responsibilities (e.g., young children at home)

- Classes characterized by students with low expectations for themselves and apathy about the value of education and by dysfunction and chaos, which adds up to students who are not able to work, not ready to work, or simply not interested in working.

- Limited and lacking resources at their schools, ranging from printed material (e.g., not enough books for all students) to technology (e.g., incomplete systems), as well as limited and lacking technological know-how on the part of teachers.

- The pressure to prepare students for standardized tests, which lends itself to hurried and relentless content-centered teaching and thus no time for engaging students of all ability levels.

Students, on the other hand, face challenges as well:

- Lack of attention at home

- Physical limitations such as lingering health problems (e.g., decaying teeth), unaddressed health needs (e.g., eyeglasses with current prescription) and hunger.

- Unstable homes, some characterized by family violence.

- Biased standardized tests that drive the curriculum.

- Inadequate and under-prepared teachers.

- Teachers who are drained of spontaneity

- The students become pushed along from grade to grade—on their way to graduation—with little to no hope for financial success in the future.
QUESTIONS

1. Did your parents meet with your teachers? How did this affect your education? If were an administrator at one of the low income schools described in the text, what would you do to get the parents more involved in their children’s education? What would you say to them and how would you communicate your thoughts—in an email? On TV? On the radio?

2. Shipler speaks of the “cycle of mutual resentment” on page 223. What comes first—the teacher’s low expectations or the students’ apathy and bad attitude? How could a teacher use ethos and pathos in the classroom so that this cycle could be broken, or never started in the first place?

3. Think of books or movies about teachers who succeed despite facing challenges (Stand and Deliver; To Sir, With Love; Blackboard Jungle; Dangerous Minds; Conrack, Lean on Me, Up the Down Staircase). Does gender influence how the teacher overcomes resistance from the students? What is different about today’s schools that make such a challenge different? Are today’s problems insurmountable? What should we do?

4. Shipler talks about limited resources in the schools. What is the effect of students not being able to acquire technological literacy? Should technology be a priority over books and paper? Why or why not??

5. According to Shipler, “a society’s vision and morality are on display against the back drop of its ideals” (page 252). Drawing from Jonathon Kozol, he goes on to suggest that we consistently deny our students from low-income families what they have a right to:

“In a country where there is no distinction of class, a child is not born to the station of its parents, but with an indefinite claim to all prizes that can be won by thought and labor. [Americans] 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 most consistent outcome of the education offered to poor children in the schools of our large cities.”

What does he mean by the “means of competition?” What would give them this ability? Why is this important?