

Critical reflection

Linguistics, English



Matthew Hodgert 100A Khuu English Topic Critical Reflection after reading
Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements
of America's Educationally Underprepared by Mike Rose

The Essay

As the title of the book, *Lives on the Boundary*: ... suggests, Mike Rose explores the experience he has had of students with learning challenges, and the feeling that these students have of being just on the edge of the mainstream in the American schooling system. My immediate connection with the book came from my own sense of being out of step with my classmates and the sense throughout my school life of being inferior to the other students.

My experience of self-blame, feeling inadequate and not quite good enough and of wondering what I was doing wrong all the time is something which this book showed me is felt by many young people in schools. More importantly, the book showed me that it is possible that it was not only me to blame, and gave me a sense of hope that other students feeling this way now, can be helped more than I was. Rose looks at the foundations of such feelings, starting from the effects of labeling children: "The designation remedial has powerful implications in education – to be remedial is to be substandard, inadequate" (Rose, 1989, p. 209), and I recognized my own sense of myself, throughout school, in this.

When teachers publicly separated me from the rest of my classmates, with good intentions, I am sure, because of the learning difficulty I have, it was devastating. As a Third Grader, my need to belong to the group was great, and the challenges I experienced were not only with the learning difficulty,

but equally significantly, with the teachers' and other children's perception that I was different. I internalized their view of me and became unconfident and negative about myself and my abilities.

At school, my classmates called me names, and I was no longer a "cool" friend. At home, my mother was supportive, but I could not get away from the feeling that I was disappointing her, because I could not do so well at school. This isolation is another aspect of my life that I identified with in Rose's book – a boy "Harold" writes: "I am lost in the woods. I cannot find my way out. I yell and yell. No one answered me. I climbed a tree then I fell out of the tree and broke my arm" (Rose, 1989, p. 119). While my situation was perhaps not as bad as Harold's, I did see many of my classmates, struggling more than I did, even more isolated from the mainstream. Mike Rose realized that this boy was a lonely child, feeling rejected, and that it was these feelings, more than the boy's learning challenges that caused him to not be able to perform well academically. This is despite the thorough systems available in American schools to provide support for children who struggle with academic learning.

It is with this realization that I have come to recognize that learning is not a narrowly defined thing. Even if the school system does tend to classify children and this classification has extremely negative consequences there is hope. Rose maintains throughout his book the sense that the future can be approached positively, and that school labeling does not have to determine the rest of your life. The world is not made up only of an exclusive club of people who do well at school. Rose describes this as: "...the academic club: its language is highbrow, it has fancy badges, and it worships tradition"

(Rose, 1989, p. 58). I wanted so badly to belong to this club at school, and was never allowed to have that sense of belonging.

However, creative writing, and an open academic environment have changed my outlook completely. I am no longer so obsessed with spelling and grammar correctness that I am afraid to express myself; I am no longer of the belief that only one way of learning is the right way; I can now explore the world of language and writing on my own, and with the help of teachers and professors who do not prejudge my ability because I have a “ learning difficulty”. Rose describes a group of men learning late in life, after being through unsuccessful schooling, and traumatic injuries, addictions and social deprivation. With the right choice of learning materials, the right teaching and learning approach, a sense of humor and positivity, and the right assessment techniques, even this group of men was able to learn (Rose, 1989, pp. 136-138). My reaction to reading this section was that I suddenly knew that if these people could learn successfully, so could I.

I consider teaching English to be a very responsible job. The effect a teacher can have on the self-image, confidence and ability to learn of a child cannot be underestimated – and this effect can be positive or negative. This has been shown in both Rose’s book, and in my personal experience. I was given a new sense of what is possible by this book, and this feeling that I can achieve what I set out to achieve has been strengthened by my experiences at College, now. My absolute belief is that other people, as children, can avoid the experiences I had, if teachers, school managers, parents, and the educational system generally, become aware of the effect that even a well-intentioned labeling or categorization can have. A partnership of trust and

hard work between teacher and student can and does allow the student to overcome even very difficult challenges. And even poor early learning experiences do not have to determine that failure will continue for the rest of a person's life.

Currently, I am looking forward to building on a new-found confidence, and positive partnerships between me and my teachers, and realize that my future can be as bright as I want it to be.

References

Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared*. New York: Penguin, 1989.