

An assessment of the flaws in our educational system



In the opening chapter in *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose points to an underlying issue in our educational system; how to deal with the diversity in our schools of students' knowledge and comprehension of taught material. Imperfections in the educational system makes it rigorous for certain students to learn what is being taught. Since each student is different, ideally each student should be taught in the way that suits him or her best. However, this is not the case. Throughout schooling from K-12 the curriculum is the same or very similar for everybody, but at the same time each person is an individual who has his or her own strengths and weaknesses. Many people come from different backgrounds and are unaccustomed to the way of going about getting the most out of their education. On the other hand, some students are faster or slower learners, others are stronger in certain subjects and not others, and many have no interest in these specific studies or the way in which they are taught and therefore slack off because the teacher(s) could not get through to them. Mike Rose's belief is that it is the responsibility of the teacher to go that extra mile and figure out in each individual case how to get through to each and every student and help all of them reach their full potential.

The terms remedial and vocational are scattered throughout *Lives on the Boundary*. Among other things, Mike Rose views the remedial or vocational track as a part of the major flaws in our educational system in America. Rose sees it as a dumping ground for students who teachers give up on for a variety of reasons. Many of these students have educational problems because of their backgrounds, not because of a mental deficiency. Ideally the remedial track should help the students to catch up or educate them to

the same level that is being taught in the regular classes. The picture Mike Rose paints of the remedial track is much different. The label of being a remedial student can influence the way a student looks at his academia. Students tend to do what is expected of them. If a student is labeled an honors student he will have certain expectations of himself and be more apt to work hard to make that label stick. On the other hand, a student deemed remedial will most likely have less interest and put in less time for their school work. They will also be less apt to try to work on the things they are struggling with. Mike Rose mistakenly was deemed a vocational student, and in that track he performed poorly for his future standards. It was not until his mentor and father figure, Jack MacFarland, came into his life and helped that he realize his full potential. Later in life Mike Rose takes this mentor role many times by getting through and educating students who were viewed to be hopeless.

Within the first few pages of *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose gives a personal narrative from UCLA's most basic English class. Professors joked about the course claiming it was for "boneheads" (2). Mike Rose observed a lesson to find that these students were just as bright as the next, they just needed guidance to channel their knowledge properly. Mike Rose even made a pun about the experience joking that those students "are the truly illiterate among us" (3). This expresses Mike Rose's point of view. His belief is that these labels are destructive and counterproductive. Mike Rose sees this as a medical procedure as each student is diagnosed with certain problems and then lumped together. At first the term remedial was given to student with neurological problems. It then began to be used for students

that came from backgrounds that did not yield advantageous opportunities for their education. Mike Rose has a very strong opinion that these students should not be grouped together and regarded as a lost cause, so quickly thrown into classes that treat them as if they are a hopeless case. Mike Rose feels that this practice is unfair and the only way to rectify it is by giving each student who needs it individual attention.

Mike Rose does not believe the issue for slow learners is due to a lack of intellect, on the contrary, almost all of the time it has to do with coming from a different background or culture. I did not pick up on this at the time but Mike Rose tells the elongated version of his childhood to show how an underprivileged child born to immigrant parents can easily struggle and be written off as a result. Mike Rose's parents were immigrants from Italy. Throughout Mike Rose's childhood they struggled financially and did not have the opportunity to get involved with his education, through no fault of their own. Mike Rose's interest in reading dissipated throughout his early teen years as a result of him being sent to the vocational track. He was surrounded by peers and teachers whose expectations of him were substandard. One day in vocational track the religion teacher brought up the topic of talents, achievement, and hard work. A student named Ken Harvey was asked to give his opinion on the matter and his response was one that has stuck with Mike Rose all these years: " I just wanna be average" (28). Mike Rose holds the belief that this is primary issue with the vocational track. As a result of these students being labeled as remedial they tend to shy away from school in general and just want to be mediocre. Mike Rose is attempting to open the eyes of teachers. He realizes that these students are

not properly evaluated and that teachers need to do more to get through to their students instead of giving up on them.

In Chapter 5 of *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose shows us how his own story is not unique and it occurs universally in the educational system. After dropping out of the UCLA graduate program, Mike Rose joins the Teacher Corps. He is sent to El Monte and is assigned to work with fifteen of the school's worst reading students. Mike Rose uses what many would consider unconventional methods to get through to these students and finds a dramatic increase in their reading and writing comprehension. After his time working with these particular students was through, he came to the realization that these students were destined to falter. The pedagogical methods that were used by the teachers in that school were not necessarily methods that worked for every student. The students Mike Rose taught were not slow witted, they were simply just being taught in a way that did not suit their abilities. Mike Rose gathered that it was the backgrounds of the students that affected their schooling. It was not until Mike Rose understood all of these factors that he determined the underlying problems that the educational system in America, a land full of diversity, is currently facing.

Mike Rose believes that many students coming from underprivileged backgrounds are at a disadvantage in the classroom. His time teaching in El Monte brought him into the world of some of these students. Ray had problems understanding why he committed inappropriate acts. He was caught vandalizing school property on a number of occasions. Both of Ray's parents were battling alcoholism (112). Terry had issues with violence. He had broken another student's jaw and bragged about a time he had chased
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away a gang of boys with a chain. Mike Rose mentioned that Terry was the kind of person he would try to avoid as a child. Terry lived alone with his mother in a dilapidated home with trash all over the front yard. His mother was a member of a white supremacist bike gang and, from what Mike Rose understood, was also a prostitute (113). Mike Rose believes that coming from a background such as the one Terry or Ray came from can easily hinder the way these students communicate and are viewed by others inducing these students to acquire a label such as remedial. Mike Rose has virtuous beliefs about how the educational system should be changed, but are his methods feasible to be implemented on a large scale?

Mike Rose wrote *Lives on the Boundary* primarily to inform the masses of the flaws in our educational system, principally the vocational track. Mike Rose has proved that many of these students are not feeble minded, instead they are in need of being taught in a different context. Mike Rose's experiences prove that you can get through to these students, only in a different fashion. Providing individual attention and researching a student's background are methods he used to understand and subsequently broach their drive towards maximizing their education. Mike Rose's beliefs and methods are righteous and honorable but they are not practical. Fortunately, there are people like Mike Rose out there who are willing to put in 110%, however, it would be utopian to believe that every educator shares his ambition. A major theme in this book is hope, lets hope that Mike Rose's book can help make a change in our educational system.

Rose, Mike. *Lives on the boundary: a moving account of the struggles and achievements of America's educationally underprepared*. Penguin Group USA, 2005. Print.