



**A REVIEW OF ROSE 'MIKES" LIVES O THE BOUNDARY," A GUIDE
FOR STRUGGLES AND ACHIEVEMENTS FOR EDUCATIONAL
DISADVANTAGED STUDENT**

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Abstract

Lives on the Boundary: A moving account of the struggles and achievements of America's educationally unprepared study guide, written by Mike Rose, is a qualitative research. In the book he discusses underclass of students considered underachieving, remedial, or illiterate, and the kinds of literacy and liberal arts curricula that can best help them to progress. The methodology used in the study is that of phenomenological design where the author begins with his life experience of humble beginnings and continues up to his adult years. The book focuses on the struggles and achievements of America's educationally underprepared. The book is written on a first person account composed of eight chapters each of which treat a different obstacle faced by the author in his years as a student and as an educator. More specifically, in chapters one through five the author focuses on his own personal struggles and achievements as a student which serves as a guide for an educational disadvantaged student.

Keywords: Rose Mike, Education, Disadvantaged Students

Introduction

The author uses phenomenological research to illustrate his experiences. According to Ross (1999), phenomenology research describes the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness, without recourse to theory, deduction, or assumptions from other disciplines such as the natural sciences. The purpose of phenomenological research is to describe experiences as they are lived in phenomenological terms. He narrates his life experience as a young boy born to a first generation immigrant family, originally from Italy. He spent his early childhood in the mid-west and then in his latter childhood his parents resettled in East Los Angeles. His father suffered and died from arteriosclerosis and neither his mother nor his father had completed high school. No one in his family had ever attended college. This is the setting, background, and characters of Mike's tale of struggles and achievements of America's educationally underprepared. Throughout his book, based on his experience and observations, three main themes are emphasized: First, the importance of an educational mentor; Second, social injustices in the American education system particularly the lack of funding and bureaucracy's influence on the public educational system. Third, the specific teaching methods that were used to reach at risk students.

The book is made up of eight chapters. Chapter one, reviews the author's experiences with students classed as underprepared and question the efficacy of conventional reform initiatives for this population. Chapter two, recounts the author's own underachievement and the influence of an inspirational teacher. Chapter three, describes the author's undergraduate experience and intellectual development. Chapter four, is an account of the author's graduate study and his decision to withdraw short of completion. Chapter five, describes the author's work with the Teacher Corps in East Los Angeles. Chapter six, recounts the author's experience teaching in the Veteran's Program. Chapter seven, is a narrative of the author's work at the Tutorial Center at UCLA. Chapter eight, recapitulates themes and fallacies common to all remedial education forums.

Research Question

The book is of great help to all teachers who want to understand the minds of their struggling students in order to help them achieve academically and socially in life. The author demonstrates his experience as an academic outsider to explain how poor students can feel intimidated and threatened by academic requirements when they do not have a caring teacher to help bridge the academic gap life situation has created for them. The author takes his reader through his life experience as an underachieving ghetto student to his academic successes at the highest levels of the university. His journey through education covers most of the book's pages to show his journey from "grass to grace." However, the central theme is that it takes special teachers with interest and caring to help students overcome academic deficiencies. Teachers need to form personal ties with their students, especially struggling kids, to ensure that they get the necessary help. The research question is thus: How can a teacher's philosophy be shaped and become more effective to empower underprepared students on the margin of society? Or, how can the American educational system better serve underachieving students?

Purpose of the book

The purpose of the book is to provide great insight to what the new teaching professional may anticipate in the classroom. The book is meant to inform a teacher's philosophy and to render the teacher more effective in his or her profession. It serves as a tool that can be used to motivate teachers to produce interesting lesson plans and to be aware of their students in all aspects. It also provides concrete examples of good and bad teaching all related through the author's personal history.

The ultimate aim of the book is to highlight the under preparedness of some of today's learners and to encourage them to take the challenge to succeed in life. Rose himself succeeded in his book because he

demonstrates inventive methods to initiate underprepared students into the world of language, literature, and written expression. The book as an account of one man's personal struggle, reflects on the inner psyche of the marginal student and prompts the reader to be more attentive to each and every learner.

I can confidently say that the book is meant to challenge students, educators, policymakers, and parents to re-examine their assumptions about the capabilities of students. The book is classical in nature, offering a truly democratic vision, heading toward America's future.

Basic Research Design

Researcher Role and Data Collection

The author did a qualitative study using a narrative approach as his main design strategies, with himself as the principal participant. There is no statistical data presented in this study because it is a narrative research based on the story of the author's life mixed in with stories of his students. The book is autobiographical and it is written in the first person with the author serving as the narrator and participant. The data collection is based on the author's life experiences, personal observations and interviews of his students to know their background, weaknesses and how to help them improve. He played the role of participant observant and ethnographer because of his creative description of his experiences which covers culture, social setting and educational attainment. Rose has a firsthand experience with the participants and the setting was based on rural and school settlement. Rose uses observation and noted the behavior and activities of individuals at in his locality and school.

Site: Rose used various sites in his book. First was his neighborhood where he grew and saw a lot of anger and frustration. When he was a boy his family moved to Los Angeles and lived in a house located one and half

miles northwest of Watts. He describes the house they lived in and the people of the neighborhood. People dreamed of a better life but there wasn't much passion in what they did. Another site is the various classes he attended as a student and taught as a teacher. He sits outside and talks to some of the students, and finds they are having problems. Another place was UCLA where some feel that they don't belong at UCLA even though they excelled during high school. Rose attended St. Regina's but doesn't have many memories of his school days. He volunteered to work at depressed area school districts of El Monte. Other sites include Tijuana is a Mexican border city across from San Diego, California. Our Lady of Mercy High School is in Los Angeles, about fifteen miles northwest of where Rose lived. Loyola University is located in Los Angeles and is where Mike Rose attended college and Manhattan Beach.

Participants: The participants are mainly students and few adults whom he watched. His parents were Italian immigrants who settled in Altoona, Pennsylvania. His family was very poor with the father working as a tailor and the mother working as a waitress. Rose also describes what his life was like. There weren't many kids his age in the neighborhood, so he spent most of his time with adults. The result is a lot of anger and frustration and the dream of a better life. Some students relate while others don't. There was a high school English teacher, Jack MacFarland, who greatly influenced Mike Rose and stimulated his interest in reading and writing. MacFarland provided a role model for Mike who began to like receiving good grades. It is MacFarland who began to interest Mike in going on to college. He arranged for Mike's acceptance at Loyola University as a probationary student and helped him obtain student loans. The personal interest of this teacher probably changed Mike Rose's life.

Observation: Rose uses observation method more than any other method of data collection. He writes down his observations in the book to give hope for those in the American education system. In his observations he

saw how language and cultural barriers had made so many students and graduates incapable to read and write at an acceptable level. Many of those students are labeled as remedial and relegated to special classes, regardless of why they can't read and write at an acceptable level. This is a label they carry through their many years of school and into the working world. He realized that many of these students just need someone to understand their problem and spend some time with them to help them overcome their problems. This is especially true of immigrants and people from economically deprived areas.

Interview: Rose also uses qualitative interviews which are opened-ended questions that are few in number which he elicited views and opinions from his participants (students and adult in school and neighborhood).

Field Memos: Rose uses field memos to reflect his experience and feeling mixed in with stories of his students daily. In his memos, Rose relates his experience growing up in South Los Angeles, the son of poor immigrant parents. He tells of the difficulties he experienced in the American education system. Sent to a Catholic high school, he spent two years in the Vocational Education program for remedial programs so he had firsthand experience with the classification and the kind of education a remedial program provided. He also reflects what it means to have a teacher take an interest in a student personally and give special help, something that he himself was able to benefit.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In analyzing the data, Rose analyzed his role as principal character and he writes his note as a participant and observer at the same time. He also analyzed the role of other participants like his parents, neighbors, mentor and colleagues. In the study there is perfect description of places, scenarios and events that took place based on his personal experience. The author relates his background experience of growing up in South Los Angeles, as a son of poor immigrant parents. He tells of the difficulties he

experienced in the American education system. Sent to a Catholic high school, he spent two years in the Vocational Education program for remedial programs giving him first hand experience with the classification and the kind of education a remedial program provided. He also learned first hand what it means to have a teacher takes a personal interest in a student and give special help, something that he himself was able to do later in life as a professor. The choices of the author to use a narrative approach as the main research design made the study to be more exploratory and interesting carrying the reader along with a lot of descriptions of persons, events and places. This approach enables the author to be innovative, creative, and to use literary style he prefers to relate his personal experiences in order to awaken teachers and encourage students to work hard towards achievement.

Reliability, Validity and Generalizability

In looking at the basic research design generally, I can say that the data are organized and analyzed step by step because the author carries the reader from his humble beginning up to his highest academic attainment. The author gave the names of people and places just the way he experienced them making his work more real and authentic. To validate his work, some of his colleagues and mentors during his school days wrote reviews on his book, *Lives on the Boundary*, to testify to the authenticity of his study. Rose's themes were categorized into chapters of the book and were interrelated because each theme leads the reader to another development of his life as he works hard towards achievement. The data were not presented in the form of tables, or graphs, or figures but in a plain literature style of writing. The bases for interpreting the analysis is through the use of personal experiences of the author. I can say that after reading *Lives on the Boundary* and listening to the author on a live show, that his English background comes through in this text as he creates a real narrative filled with real people. His passion for the power of education is evident in these vignettes.

Central findings

The book is basically about education in a social context dealing with engagement of relationships, struggles, discoveries and transitions. The author wants to bring out the best of every educator and student as he leads the reader through his intellectual discoveries while developing his literacy and pedagogy. He lets the reader travel with him, back and forth from ghetto to academy, reflecting deeply together on the cross-boundary teaching-learning process. The study provides an important view to the actual thoughts and perceptions of a student who considered himself to be underprepared. I will say that the author believes in the healing possibilities of the teacher-student relationships (123), and his writing style is powerful leading readers into potential disciples.

Methodological Insight that I gained in the Study

Reading Liveson theBoundary, I was taken by keen interest as Rose displays empathy as strategy to get across to the students in order to assist them to develop themselves and to bring the best out of them. The author was able to put himself in the students' situation after he himself experienced the same difficulties. This helped him write with a progressive educator's empathy for students who find the academic world daunting and humiliating. Unlike some of his colleagues, his strategy is quite different because he never romanticizes students or suggests that they are demeaned if we believe they need additional instruction. As he approaches the underprivileged with care his goal is not to dismantle elite intellectual culture. He is always sympathetic to teaching alternative texts and ideas that will make the culture available to as many as possible.

The author believes that educators should use empathic methods as a means of common response to cries for education standards. For him, standards are fair only if all students are given the help and care they need to meet their academic challenge. The author believes that for college

instructors to be fair would mean, among other things, seeing their student mistakes as a stage of development rather than a symptom of cognitive deficiency or hopeless illiteracy. The author has a rare grasp of the academic world and knows why many students fail. I believe that with the use of an empathic method and different teaching strategies can greatly influence students' learning. The author also offers a psychological perspective on why certain students lack self-confidence and how it leads to poor performance. Educators and policy makers can get students educational standards and assessment right once there is connection between teacher behavior and students success (Graff, Gerald (11/13/2009). *Lives on the Boundary*' at 20).

One Issue in the Study

One of the strongest aspects of author's book for me is his demonstration that professors fail to identify the misconceptions about academic work that cause students to fail. He is out to demonstrate that teacher- student relationship can bridge this gap. He notes that it is not unusual for students to come to the university with conceptualizations of disciplines that are out of sync with academic reality. However, if a student willingly agrees to come to school to learn then such student should be given all encouragement necessary to enable him to become productive to himself and the community. The author argues that the college curriculum is often a litany of misdirection that increases the dissension between the academy's and the students' definition of disciplines. This dissension makes it hard for students to work with material: to know what's important, to see how the pieces fit together, to follow an argument, to have a sense of what can be passed over lightly. It should be the responsibility of the teacher to carry the students along with special intention to the disadvantaged ones by making the curriculum suitable to them. I am impressed by the author because he himself walked the walk. He too has suffered from uninspiring education in Los Angeles and takes

us through his chain of progress from unengaged, mediocre student to UCLA graduate student and teacher. As he does this, and especially when he writes on his teaching experiences, he takes us in close to the classroom in a way few others in educational research do.

Reading this book has made me believe that a teacher is supposed to recognize the struggles that a student is going through due to physical and psychosocial changes. The author presents many descriptive scenes about his teachers who have influenced him both positively and negatively and whom he has retained for emulation or distinction. These figures in his life include teachers from grammar school throughout his college experience. All of them have in one way or another left a remarkable print on his recollection of school and learning. He also experienced a few teachers who used corporal punishment to control their classrooms.

In another development, he made his reader to understand that it is not just only teacher behavior and attitude that determines the success of the student but there are other exceptional factors that play enormous roles. First and foremost is the students' individual lack of ambition from the inside and peer pressure for the outside that can contribute to the unease of the student. From the author's very first feelings of insecurity and lack of self-confidence in the grammar school classroom as a child, when he would hide and daydream, up until his first years of college, when he would avoid areas that were difficult, the author recognized that there was important link between challenging the student on a meaningful level and the degree to which the student eventually produced. Rose says, "I felt stupid telling them I was.. well - stupid" (Rose 43). Here, the author shows an example of how poor preparation and low standards in the classroom can make a student feel inadequate.

I will conclude by saying that the author, most importantly of all gives us a hopeful message and perspective on education that is often missing from the largely negative discourse on education that plagues the media today. Rose shows us that everyone from a Vietnam Veteran to an elementary school student struggling with writing, to a shell-shocked college freshman can accomplish and succeed if we don't write them off before they ever have a chance.

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