

WORKING NARRATIVE

Recognizing Barriers

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In his book, Lives on The Boundary, Mike Rose uncovered the detrimental effects of mislabeling elementary students when tutoring once a week in the poor Los Angeles neighborhood of El Monte. He writes, "every day in our schools and colleges, young people confront reading and writing tasks that seem hard or unusual, that confuse them, that they fail. But if you can get close enough to their failure, you'll find knowledge that the assignments didn't tap, ineffective rules and strategies that have a logic of their own; you'll find clues, as well to the tremendous difficulties our children face as they attempt to find their place in the American educational system (8).

In one instance, Rose played a portion of the song "Rocky Raccoon" for some "remedial" children. He then instructed the kids to write the ending of the song. The results defied the "remedial" label these children were given: "several children asked to come back after school to finish their long, detailed endings, fuller and richer than anything [he] or their teachers had yet seen them write" (103). An

exercise unlike a typical grammar worksheet or standardized test revealed these children knew more than their label credits. Through examples such as these, Rose provided evidence for his disapproval of the labels designated by the educational system.

I support Rose's claim because it applies to many of the children I worked with in a tutoring program. A recent nationwide statistic had found the state of Minnesota to have the most segregation among public schools. I joined an extracurricular called Back Pack Tutoring to help counteract statistics such as this by bringing suburban high school students to the inner city elementary schools once a week throughout the school year. Each high school student was paired with a second or third grader to tutor that student in the basic areas of math and reading. The children participating in the program were those scoring in the lowest 10 percent on a particular standardized test given out by the state.

While at school, I always assumed students benefited from teachers separating them according to ability. What I soon found was the separation that took place at Brookside Elementary affected how the student was perceived and treated as a human being. On the first day of tutoring I was apprehensive, yet excited. All the high school tutors waited in the cafeteria for the elementary students. As

the elementary students came down the stairs, Mrs. Raider, the choir teacher, proceeded to get out her megaphone only to yell the command, "line up!" over and over again with threats about the consequences of talking.

Once Mrs. Raider finished embarrassing herself, she went down the line and auctioned off every student, "Who wants Cassius? He has trouble focusing. His weaknesses are reading and writing." From there, each student was paired with a tutor. A teacher gave warnings about student's behavior and instructions to combat academic weaknesses.

After twenty minutes of what seemed like boot camp, the room was ordered to be quiet and get to work. I looked at Cassius to see if any of this had made him uncomfortable as it had made me. He seemed perfectly at ease, used to being yelled at and reminded of his weaknesses. Coming into the program, I thought the best way to help the student learn would be to learn about his family life and his "environmental limits and determiners" (114). After I had developed a trusting relationship with Cassius, I would proceed with the issued timed tests. I found out Cassius lived with his mother, four brothers, two cousins, and his grandmother. His mother worked and his brothers were older. Cassius played with himself at home and seldom had supervision.

As I continued our conversation, the teachers had

separated the group further. Cassius and I, along with other pairs, were to work on worksheets the full two hours whereas others could play games after an hour. This was for Cassius' benefit they told me, he needed extra practice. Upon hearing this news, Cassius' attitude changed. The grammar exercises "drained the life out all [learning], reducing literacy to the dry dismembering of language. It seemed to me that such a curriculum was especially troublesome for children...who had not been prepped in their home to look at language in this dissected, unnatural way" (110). Education was not valued in Cassius' home. He often asked why he had to do something and commonly responded with 'I don't care' after I read a question on one of his worksheets. It was apparent that when Cassius had taken a test it reflected solely his mood and had nothing to do with "the low IQ of minority kids and all that bullshit. From what I saw, it only [measured] how well [he wanted] to play the game" (98).

As test results deemed Cassius as a failure for his age, the teachers continued to be fooled by what they saw as a "slow learner." Over time, I learned a different truth. As time went on in the program I made the decision that if Cassius concentrated on what he was doing for an amount of time we agreed upon, then he could pick a book and a game of his choice to do for the remainder of the afternoon.

Once the deal had been made, he revealed his true intelligence. Cassius was an excellent reader and could do math accurately and quickly. His work ethic shifted when given the rewards some of the “faster learners” enjoyed. This exhibits the truth in Rose’s idea that “many remedial programs...[train] to do the minimum” (141). Cassius wouldn’t do anymore than what was expected unless he could enjoy a reward like the other children; but, over time, Cassius and I decided he should finish more worksheets before playing a game. Cassius not only found the teachers in disbelief when he completed his work, he found a sense of pride in the amount he could complete without help. “The loads teachers carry, the ways they’re trained to deal with difference, the vast patchwork of diagnostics and specialist” were the reasons why no one found out Cassius learned best with a challenge; “teaching...was a kind of romance” (102). Cassius’ learning ability thrived on our relationship and his competitiveness. By sharing situations at his home, he was able to be clear his head before we delved into worksheets. Once we started worksheets, Cassius adapted best when competing with himself to complete his work quickly and correctly.

Rose’s experience in El Monte correlated to my experience at Ramsey Elementary. Looking back on my time spent with Cassius, Rose’s claim unfortunately fits

perfectly. In a very test-oriented school, Cassius remained a failure. Because Cassius didn't care at the beginning, his teachers considered him a "slow learner." However, having the opportunity to tap into his family life and figure out that he thrived on competition, Cassius revealed his true intelligence. At the end of the year the teachers told Cassius and me they were proud of his improvements. This was one of the first compliments I heard Cassius receive from a teacher. Rose's claim is not only valid, it would prove beneficial if applied by staff working at academically suffering schools.

Works Cited

Rose, Mike. Lives on The Boundary. NY: Penguin, 1989, 1990.