

EDUCATION AND COMING OF AGE

Is Tracking Segregationist?

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Maya Angelou's story of her childhood in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings supports the views of Mike Rose about tracking in "I Just Wanna Be Average." These two authors had similar experiences as children; they were both at a disadvantage in the educational system. Mike Rose was placed into the vocational track in school because his test results got mixed up with another student's. The vocational track "is most often a place for those who are just not making it, a dumping ground for the disaffected." (Rose, p. 38). Maya Angelou was in a similar situation not because of a test, but the color of her skin. Maya attended an all-black school; they did not have the same opportunities as the students in the all-white school in Stamps. "The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren't even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises." (Angelou, p. 179). Segregation was a type of

tracking; the students in the white and black schools did not receive equal educations.

When segregation was still legal in the United States, African-American students would receive mediocre educations to prepare them for manual labor jobs or domestic work, while the European-Americans were prepared to continue onto college and become doctors, lawyers, and high powered executives. The blacks were not expected to succeed: "Only a small percentage would be continuing on to college-one of the South's A & M (agricultural & mechanical) schools, which trained Negro youths to be carpenters, farmers, handymen, masons, maids, cooks and baby nurses." (Angelou, p. 170). Separate but equal was simply a falsehood. The white schools were equivalent to the college preparatory track in today's tracking system and the black schools were the equivalent to the vocational education track. This put the African-American students at a disadvantage to the European-American students just as the vocational education students are at a disadvantage to the college preparatory students in the working world. When students are placed into different tracks they do not have equal opportunities to grow academically.

Both Maya Angelou and Mike Rose are intelligent people who did not receive the education they deserved because of ignorance. In Maya's situation blacks were simply viewed as second rate citizens who could not do anything more than manual labor; the careers requiring higher levels of intelligence were reserved for the whites. There was nothing that would prevent blacks from performing the same jobs as whites except social norms. For a long time in this country whites tried to keep blacks from prospering and even in 2003 some whites have views that blacks are not quite as intelligent or capable of doing certain jobs. For example our country still has not elected a black president; although I cannot say for sure that is because our society still views blacks as being the lower race. In Rose's situation the school system failed to notice a significant mistake that affected his success in school in a bad way. Finally "Brother Clint puzzled over this Voc. Ed. kid who was racking up 98s and 99s on his tests. He checked the school's records and discovered the error." (Angelou, p. 40). When the mistake was finally discovered (rather easily) he had the difficult task of jumping from the vocational track to the college prep track: "Switching to College Prep was a mixed blessing. I was an erratic

student. I was undisciplined. And I hadn't caught onto the rules of the game: Why work hard in a class that didn't grab my fancy? I was also hopelessly behind in math." (Rose, p. 40). The Vocational Ed. program did not adequately prepare him to make the transition. The math program in the vocational education track was far behind that of the college preparatory program. He had many challenges to face making that jump. Mike Rose is an intelligent man who succeeded despite his challenges; he moved on to college and became a college professor. Their placements into these "tracks" were out of their control; Angelou was placed by her skin color and Rose was placed by the failure of the public school system to recognize a mistake.

At this time sports were emphasized in the black schools. Blacks were expected to either be athletes or perform manual labor. Mr. Donleavy "bragged that 'one of the best basketball players at Fisk sank his first ball right here at Lafayette County Training School.'" (Angelou, p. 179). During his speech at Maya's eighth grade graduation he said that Central School (the white school) would "have the newest microscopes and chemistry equipment for their laboratory." (Angelou, p. 178 – 179). The students at

Lafayette would be getting new fields; their improvements focused on athletics rather than academics. This shows that the public schools in Stamps did not give the whites and blacks equal treatment and opportunities.

I do not believe that segregation was originally meant to be like tracking, but it is similar. The concept of separate but equal was not a well thought out educational plan. The educational opportunities were not equal; more money was invested into the white schools and they had the well-educated teachers, not because the white students are more capable but because racism gives whites the advantage. The same is true for tracking. The teachers with better qualifications and higher degrees typically teach the college preparatory classes while the less qualified teachers are placed in the vocational education track. All students deserve the same opportunities to learn no matter what their post-secondary plans. Both Mike Rose and Maya Angelou's works show why tracking was not a positive thing in either of their lives.

Works Cited

Angelou, Maya. I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings. New York: Bantam, 1969.

Rose, Mike. "I Just Wanna Be Average." Fall 2003
Coursepack. Valparaiso University, 2003.