

# **Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Unprepared Study Guide**

**Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Unprepared by Mike Rose (educator)**

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# Plot Summary

The author, Mike Rose, begins the Preface by stating that *LIVES ON THE BOUNDARY* is a book of hope for those in the American education system. There are language and cultural barriers and many students and graduates who cannot 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.

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. These students need someone to figure out what their problem is and to devise a way to help them work through it. This is what Mike Rose is so successful at doing. He would work with children who were deemed to be remedial, discover their problem, and find a way to help them so their academic performance improved. This required a lot of extra time on his part, time that regular school teachers do not have to give to students on an individual basis.

*LIVES ON THE BOUNDARY* is the story of the author's experience with the American education system interspersed with stories about his students. His parents were immigrants from Italy who settled in Altoona, Pennsylvania and moved to Los Angeles when Mike was a child. He grew up in the tough area of South Los Angeles. There were few books in his home, but his parents wanted him to have the best education they could afford and sent him to a Catholic high school. Due to a records mixup, he was assigned to the Vocation Education program, which was for remedial students. The error was discovered during his second year and remedied, so he began his junior year in the college prep program. A teacher stimulated his interest in reading and writing and helped him gain admission to Loyola University where he did well due to the special attention of several teachers. Rose qualified for a fellowship at UCLA. After the first year of courses, he tried psychology, found it didn't meet his expectations, and dropped out to join the Teacher's Corps. Here he learned of the special problems of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. He worked with veterans in the Veteran's Program and was able to develop a program to meet their special needs. After this, he managed the Tutorial Center of the Educational Opportunity Program at UCLA.

The EOP was the first opportunity Rose had to work with students who weren't considered marginal. But he discovered that students from the lower classes had problems in college, even if they did well in high school. He was able to determine the problems the students had and devise ways to help them.

Literacy in education is a major issue in America. Even though students from the middle and upper classes also have problems in college, the problem is more acute in those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Rose feels the American education system does not deal well with these problems. It relies too much on assessment testing and ignores the cultural and economic background of the student. Many do not understand what is

expected from them if the test directions are just read to them, but if someone explains and shows them what is expected, their performance is much better.

Rose feels he and others succeeded academically, despite their socio-economic background, which indicates there is hope for the educational system. This short book is well worth reading.



## pp. 1-16

### pp. 1-16 Summary and Analysis

The book opens with the story of Laura who is a student at UCLA. Born in Mexico, she came to the United States at the age of six. This is her fifth attempt at the remedial English class. She feels she is a poor writer and clenches when she has to write.

The author sits in on various classes and watches the classroom activity. Some students relate; others don't. He sits outside and talks to some of the students, including Bobby, and finds they are having problems. Some feel that they don't belong at UCLA even though they excelled during high school. These students are why many universities instituted a back-to-basics program that emphasized grammar, spelling and usage. These complaints of college academics aren't new - they date back to the middle of the nineteenth century.

The University of California began the Subject A Examination in 1898. This was the predecessor of the English A course with which Laura and Bobby were having problems. There is a problem with American schools in that they are structured in different ways and their curricula are not uniform. The result is that students find themselves unable to perform the reading and writing assignments. The author believes there are links between literacy and culture which is evident in the classroom. Some, like Laura, freeze from fear; others, like Bobby, feel estranged because of the strangeness of the subject matter and the methodologies teachers use.

The author tells the story of how his parents, Italian immigrants to Altoona, Pennsylvania, moved to Los Angeles when he was a boy. They lived in a poor neighborhood. The house was furnished with furniture from a used furniture store, where the father worked several hours a day to pay for the furniture. Rose describes the house and the neighborhood they lived in and the various people who live in the neighborhood.



## pp. 17-33

### pp. 17-33 Summary and Analysis

The discussion of the author's childhood continues. There were few kids his age so he spent most of his time with the adults. There was violence in the neighborhood and a lot of anger and frustration. People dreamed of a better life but there wasn't much passion in what they did.

Some people escape this kind of life through the classroom. The author attended St. Regina's but doesn't have many memories of his school days. He does remember having problems with grammar and math and would daydream in class as a result. Rose liked science as a result of a chemistry set he received as a Christmas gift. He would read the science book in the meager St. Regina's library. His interest in writing developed in high school. A family friend began to drive him to the public library.

Rose's parents decided he would have the best education they could afford and sent him to Our Lady of Mercy High School, about fifteen miles from home. This resulted in long bus rides. The school accidentally mixed his records with those of another student, and he was placed in vocational classes. Since neither he nor his Italian immigrant parents understood what vocational classes meant, it was two years before the error was detected. Rose discusses the quality of the education. The vocational program was for the lowest level of students who did not perform well in school.

One day in class, a student, Ken Harvey, answered a question by saying he just wanted to be average. This response caused Mike to begin thinking. He didn't want to just be average and the line stuck with him through the years. It also motivated him. In sophomore Biology, a teacher became interested in Mike Rose. Why was he in Vocational Education when his test scores were so high. An examination of the records revealed the error and he was placed in the College Prep program for his junior year.

Rose does a good job explaining the problems students have in school. There are stumped by the subject or methodology and begin to daydream because they don't know how to tackle the problem.



## pp. 34-50

### pp. 34-50 Summary and Analysis

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.

Mike and other students would visit MacFarland's apartment and Mike learned about an entirely different kind of lifestyle. The boys began to frequent the cinema and spent time in coffee shops discussing the books they'd borrowed from MacFarland and read. Mike realized the value of knowledge and information.

Rose fixed one of the trailers behind his mother's house to use as his own room. His friends often congregated there and Mike began to fill the room with books. In 1962, his friend John Connor moved in with him. John's parents had moved to Oregon and he was attending college at Loyola, along with Mike. Loyola, at this time, was a small, all-boys, Catholic school. The two drove to school together. They would each attend their classes and then meet for lunch.

Mike's academic performance was borderline the first year. He didn't ask for help from his professors. Most of the students came from backgrounds different from his. Mike and John remained separate from the other students and didn't participate in the social life. Two factors brought about a change. Jack MacFarland called some of the teachers he knew at Loyola who agreed to provide supervision for Mike and John and Lou Minton, his mother's roommate, died. He now had to look out for his mother.

Loyola was a good school for Mike. It was small enough for the teachers to give the students special attention which was important to a couple of students from South Los Angeles, as it is for students from other depressed areas. These students require special guidance. Thus, Mike began his second year at Loyola.





## pp. 51-67

### pp. 51-67 Summary and Analysis

Rose struggled with the Philosophy courses which are required at Catholic universities. As a result of the special help he was receiving, he was learning to deal with the difficult topics instead of escaping into daydreams. Mike found subjects and books which interested him. Instead of spending all his time in his trailer, he spent much time around the office of Dr. Frank Carothers, the chair of the English Department. Mike became a member of the English Society, which Dr. Carothers sponsored.

A special seminar with Dr. Erlandson was arranged for Mike and John in place of a survey course. Dr. Erlandson helped both of them with their writing and grammar. Both benefited from the one on one time with him. Because of the special attention of these men, along with Father Albertson, Rose received a good liberal education. They helped him to develop the abilities that he needed to succeed. They made the subject matter come alive for him, as did other teachers he studied under in the last two years.

Rose won the Blenkiron Award for excellence in English and served on the staff of the campus magazine, El Playno. He was chosen as editor during his senior year. This was a good experience for him because he had to learn management skills as well as all that goes into publishing a magazine.

By Rose's junior year, he was receiving all A's. This allowed him to apply for graduate fellowships, with the assistance of the Loyola Staff. Eventually, he received full support for three years at UCLA.



## pp. 68-84

### pp. 68-84 Summary and Analysis

Mike Rose is now headed for graduate school at UCLA. He wants a program that will help to develop him intellectually and prepare him to teach. He wants to be able to use books to change the lives of others, just as books had changed his life. Rose was now sharing an apartment with John Connor and two other friends.

UCLA is much larger than Loyola, and Rose is impressed with its size. Rose discusses the course he was enrolled in that first semester and the Professors who taught them. Bibliography was a course on library research methods and resources taught by Charles Gullans. Rose also took courses on literature and began preparing for the language requirement. Rose was well prepared from the education and training he had received at Loyola. What was different was the competitive nature of the students, and Rose was still insecure in making oral presentations when being questioned.

Rose spent the days on campus and stayed at the library until it closed. At the apartment, he had interesting neighbors with whom he enjoyed talking. Even though Rose had a fellowship, he had to earn his spending money so did odd jobs at apartment complexes. The first year, he earned all A's and one B but didn't follow through on some of the suggestions of his professors, like submitting for publication some of the papers he had written. He was beginning to struggle, but didn't realize it.

At this point, Rose was thinking of leaving with a masters degree and teaching at a junior college. He discussed the possibility with Dr. Carothers and the others, and they advised against it, telling him he would work his way through the disillusionment and not to lose the good fellowship he had. Rose was interested in psychology and thought about switching fields, so he put his fellowship on hold and studied psychology for a year. During this time, he kept in contact with several close friends from Loyola. During this time he wrote poetry and sent the poems to his friends who functioned as his audience and critics. Rose finally decided that he didn't want to do graduate work in psychology. He resigned his fellowship.



## pp. 85-101

### pp. 85-101 Summary and Analysis

Mike has now dropped out of graduate school at UCLA and is working in the Teacher Corps, one of the Great Society programs. This program sent teams of volunteers to help out in depressed area school districts. Their team of five would soon be sent to El Monte and would also be taking courses at USC, as part of the requirement of the program. One of the members of his team, Lillian is showing him around the area. They visit various places in El Monte, since this is part of the requirements of the Teachers Corps.

Rose and the other three interns were assigned to two schools in the center of El Monte. There were factories and commercial establishments around the schools but the other areas were residential. Mike, Lillian, Joe and Monica, the team, spent three days of each week in El Monte and the other two at USC earning their teaching credentials. Until they had teaching credentials, all they could do was to observe in the classrooms. Mike requests and receives Rosalie Naumann as his master teacher.

Rosalie decided to have Mike work with fifteen of the school's worst readers. He is panicked by the idea but his first class goes well. The kids relate to him and like the activities they do with him. Rose presents some of the children's writings in the book.

## **pp. 102-118**

### **pp. 102-118 Summary and Analysis**

Mike continues his work with the challenged readers. Instead of having them write about pictures, he tells them a story and has them write the ending. The children were becoming interested in their work with Mike. He discusses the situation with Ben, the supervisor of the team. Ben tells him to have the children make a book of their writings and Mike does this at the next class.

When his time with this group of students ended, there were other groups of students with whom he was assigned to work. Many of the children were considered substandard academically which led Mike to question the curriculum and the assessment testing. The curriculum was more or less mechanical and not appropriate for the kinds of children with whom Mike was working. These kind of children were destined to fail at the kind of mechanical curriculum offered by the school system. This didn't mean they were illiterate or retarded; it just meant that the methods and tools of teaching were inadequate. They would respond to different techniques, which Mike learned from working with the children.

Mike began to understand how deeply the children were affected by their backgrounds and living conditions. They reacted to their home environments by the attitudes they affected in school. Some acted tough; others were withdrawn.

The team frequently dined together and discussed the students and wondered what would become of them. Mike kept notes of his time at El Monte and his impression of the effect of the environment on the children. Mike could relate to these children and their problems because of his background in South Los Angeles. The school system more or less reinforced the marginality of these children. This view was reinforced during this second year in the Teacher Corps when he was assigned to work with a student named Harold Morton.



## pp. 119-135

### pp. 119-135 Summary and Analysis

Harold Morton was a fifth grade student who was a poor performer when Mike was assigned to work with him. Mike made an effort to spend extra time with Harold and went to visit his home. He talked with Mrs. Morton and learned that Harold's father had left when Harold was five years old and was currently in jail. Mike learned what he could about the boy and his living conditions.

After leaving the Morton house, Mike returned to the school and looked at Harold's file. He saw how many of the boy's problems were taken as organic and how he was classified as a slow learner despite his high entry reading scores. After that, the scores were lower and Harold was defined as marginal. The reports grew more dismal from year to year until they were considering putting the child in classes for the retarded. But Harold had proven to Mike that he could read and write.

The school system had put Harold through all the medical and assessment tests because it couldn't give him what he needed. A relationship with an adult. He needed a father figure. That was something the medical and assessment tests couldn't show.

Looking over Harold's file made Mike later for a dinner with the team. Later that evening, he discusses Harold with the team. Lillian says the children's problems are the result of old hurts, not lack of study skills. The system isn't set up to identify the kinds of problems Harold has so the kids are labeled as marginal. This determines the kind of curriculum in which they are placed.

Rose does not believe these children have an equal opportunity to educational resources due to their economic and social situation. Once the child is labeled by the system, it is difficult to have the label changed, and the child's behavior begins to conform to the label as the child rebels. The teachers' workload is too heavy for them to give these kids the attention they require.

Another project of the team was to establishing an English program for immigrant adults. Many of these were parents who had children in school and felt they couldn't talk to their children's teacher.

It was now the end of their two years in El Monte and the Teacher Corp. Lillian, Monica and Joe had applied for teaching jobs in El Monte; Mike wasn't sure what he was going to do. He decided to complete the requirements for his masters degree while working as a part time tutor.



## pp. 136-150

### pp. 136-150 Summary and Analysis

Rose tutored veterans in English in a small room at the Veteran's Program. The students were veterans right out of the service, and Mike spent three afternoons a week tutoring. He spent time talking to the men and learning about their experiences. The men were racially mixed and many bore the scars of war. They were trying to work their way back into the mainstream of life.

After two months at the Veteran's Program, Rose was offered a full time position there for the following year. By that time, Mike would have completed the requirements for his masters degree. Mike accepted the offer, even though he was nervous about having to develop his own curriculum. In developing the curriculum, Mike thought about why the men were there—they were looking for a better future and wanted to leave the past behind them. He decided to emphasize classification and summarization along with comparisons and analyzing. Rose wanted his students to develop the skills of critical thinking, not just to learn grammar. He found various samples of writing from different sources to use in class.

Rose feels he developed into a real teacher by teaching in the Veteran's Program. He spent the time trying to develop a curriculum that was tailored to the needs of his students, one that was beneficial to remedial students. Rose talks about some of his students and their backgrounds. There was Willie, a vet, who spent time in prison but went on to become an English major at a state university. There was David Gonzalez who was forty years old and close to retirement from the Marines who struggled to receive a "C." Mike worked with the students on an individual basis to help them overcome their stumbling blocks and learn to express themselves better.

## **pp. 151-168**

### **pp. 151-168 Summary and Analysis**

Mike's teaching tactics drew the men into discussions. Most of the student's related to his methodology and asked for him to recommend additional reading. Some of his students kept in touch with him after leaving the program, telling him of their new lives, Mike and his tutors had to help the students overcome their fear of failure. They had to use various tactics to do this but they took the time to do so, and this is the important thing.

In the Veteran's Program, Mike was allowed to try different tactics and methodologies. He had the courage to do this. He also began to devote time to writing poetry.

Part of Mike's duties at the Veteran's Program was to provide academic counseling. This meant helping the men define their educational and vocational interests. He learned a lot from the full time counselor, Shulamite Ash. To learn more about the counseling angle and to be better able to help the students, Mike trained for the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention program and spent time working in the crisis center.

Because of the low pay at the Veteran's Program, Mike worked at a variety of other jobs over the years, mostly tutoring and teaching. He taught in community colleges and telephone conference courses for the elderly.

Mike had been hoping for a position as director of training at Suicide Prevention, but the program funding had been cut. Funding for the Veteran's Program would also soon be coming to an end. Chip Anderson, who had hired him for the Veteran's Program, was now the director of EOP, the UCLA Educational Opportunity Program. He asked Mike to interview for the position of running the tutorial Program. Mike interviewed for the position.



## pp. 169-186

### pp. 169-186 Summary and Analysis

Mike accepts the position at EOP. The Tutorial Center is located on three floors of Campbell Hall on the UCLA campus. This is the biggest unit of the EOP program and Mike is in charge of it. There already was a staff of graduate student tutors and Mike was easily able to work with them. His duties were basically administrative, and he spent the first year developing the training program and manual.

The work at the Tutorial Center represented the first time that Mike was not working with marginal students or students with a history of failure. These students had performed well in high school and were now experiencing difficulties in college. To them, being referred to a counselor was an upsetting experience. The tutors had to understand this and then find the cause of the problem the student was experiencing. This alone usually consumed the time of the first session. Some had problems with the bigness of the campus and the survey lecture sections and the resulting feelings of loneliness and isolation. They are having their first experiences with academic failure.

The students the Tutorial Center dealt with were from diverse backgrounds. There were some issues of economics and race but many students were from middle class backgrounds and experienced none of these issues. The students had a variety of different problems, and Mike discusses some of the situations he encountered with different students, such as not understanding what plagiarism is or not knowing how to approach an assignment. Each student had to have his/her problems analyzed and dealt with on an individual basis.





## pp. 187-204

### pp. 187-204 Summary and Analysis

There were many changes occurring in the American education during these years. There was much interest in the literary crisis and the drops in achievement levels. There were studies on enrollment and retention and the problems colleges and universities were experiencing. There were all kinds of statistics.

This was all new to Mike Rose who had never viewed education in this way. He had always focused on individual students and now was forced to take a different perspective. He had to learn how to use the statistics to secure funding for their programs; he had Chip Anderson to help him. Dealing with policy makers was a new experience for Mike. This led him to involvement in other projects during his four years at the Tutorial Center. These projects, such as the Writing Research Project and the Freshman Summer Program, helped students prepare for college. The current curriculum was not geared toward helping the unprepared student.

Mike felt too much emphasis was placed on test scores and not enough on student histories. Students are unprepared for the critical literacy that is required of them from their first days at a large research university. These are advanced skills that very few students have. Most just summarize instead of analyzing. They also don't understand why they are asked to continually question and apply instead of just to memorize. Few students have the opportunity to develop these skills before entering the university so many of them struggle with their courses. This is especially true of students from the lower socio-economic classes.

Once it is recognized how students are unprepared and in what areas, then it is possible to develop programs to help them. They need to have the opportunity to develop the necessary critical literary skills.

Mike learns from Chip that spending on the EOP was being questioned by the faculty. Chip allowed Mike to teach some English courses to try to improve relations with the faculty. An additional problem is that research institutions like UCLA, have difficulties reconciling their research mission with the general education mission. There are many professors who don't want to teach introductory courses. Teaching the introductory courses doesn't promote the professors careers. Research does. There was never one visit from a professor during Mike's years at the Tutorial Center. Most tended to ignore all the crisis reports about how unprepared students are. They stressed the deficiencies of the student instead of the deficiencies of lower division education.



## pp. 205 - 216

### pp. 205 - 216 Summary and Analysis

Mike Rose states he is impressed by how often the tie between poor performance and class and culture is missed or overlooked. The longer he is in the field of education, the more obvious it is to him how much educators fail to see the problems of their students. Many schools have remedial English programs that are totally separate from the traditional English programs to the extent that the remedial programs only teach basic grammar and not the basic writing skills that students need. The students are not allowed to write more than a sentence for the first year.

The use of the term "remedial" is itself a problem because it has connotations of being substandard or inadequate. This is the term used to designate students who aren't performing at the standard level of expectation. Many of these students had educational problems because of the backgrounds they came from, not because they were mentally or organically defective. As time went on, the term "remedial" was applied to all students who had problems of any kind. They were all lumped into one category. This problem will continue until the teaching of reading and writing to unprepared students is re-examined and re-thought. The curricula must be redesigned to help students, not to hinder them. Instead of emphasizing the mechanics of grammar, the program should emphasize the uses of language and the critical skills that are involved.

Many people from the lower economic groups believe school will help them in achieving their goals. They can earn a better income with more schooling. Literacy results in respect for the individual.

## **pp. 217 - 230**

### **pp. 217 - 230 Summary and Analysis**

Students are given traditional reading inventory tests that rate them on the basic skills they have learned. People who are barely literate can still exist in society, performing the basic skills. But there are not tests for this competence. All the tests are school oriented. Rose became interested in how students approached these tests. He found that some of the sections of the test were completely foreign to the student. Many did not understand what the test was asking them to do, even if the directions were read verbally. They don't perform these tasks in everyday reading, and they interpret the questions in a different way than intended. Mike found that if he spent time showing the students how to take the test, on a question by question basis, they did better. Just reading the directions was not enough.

Immigrants and the poor approach problems in a different way than do other groups. They think and use language differently than the middle and upper classes do. There is no pathology here. They just need someone to figure out what it is that they require instead of emphasizing the differences. The illiterate do not have to remain illiterate. The emphasis should be on possibility, not pathology.

Mike Rose himself was from a background similar to that of many of the problem students. His family was poor and there were few books to read in his home. An interest in writing didn't begin too late in his high school career due to the influence of Jack MacFarland. He feels that his orientation to reading occurred outside school. He also had the help from his teachers who took a special interest in him to overcome the difficulties he faced.

## pp 231 - 242

### pp 231 - 242 Summary and Analysis

Rose looks at the problem of immigrants to America. Many had a very limited education in the countries of their birth and are now taking English classes and high school equivalency courses. Rose compares them to his own family who had immigrated from Italy.

American education defines achievement in terms of what body of knowledge the student has learned. This body of knowledge is more or less standardized. Some people call for a return to the traditional history and literary curriculum a la the Great Books approach. This was the learning of the elite in the past. Rose likes this approach and feels it should be made available to everyone, not just the elite. This is what he calls the canonical curriculum.

Society needs to recognize the effect poverty has on learning and they need to take steps to deal with the problem.

Rose concludes the book with the story of Lila, a Mexican immigrant who failed the first grade. She was classified as a slow learner in the South Los Angeles school she had attended. After five years of schooling, her parents moved to Tulare Valley where the schools were better. Her grades improved well enough for her to be accepted to UCLA, where she met Mike Rose. She is proof to Mike that there is hope for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

# Characters

## Mike Rose

Mike Rose is the author of the book. His parents were Italian immigrants who settled in Altoona, Pennsylvania. When he was a boy his family moved to Los Angeles and lived in a house located one and one half miles northwest of Watts. The family was very poor with the father working as a tailor and the mother working as a waitress. He describes the house they lived in and the people of the neighborhood. 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. A Christmas gift of a chemistry set got him interested in science and he read the science books at the St. Regina's library. In high school he developed an interest in writing but this interest evolved near the end of high school, since, due to a mix up of records, he was placed in vocational classes for the first two years. Vocational classes were for students who were at the lowest level academically. The mix up was discovered during his sophomore biology class, and he began his junior year in the College Prep curriculum. An English teacher, Jack MacFarland, became a role model and helps Mike gain entrance to Loyola University. With special help and guidance, Mike went through Loyola, winning the Blenkiron Award for excellence in English. He also worked on the campus magazine, El Playano. He receives a fellowship to UCLA but leaves without a masters degree and joins the Teacher Corps. After his two year tour, he completed his masters degree and taught at the Veteran's Program. He also worked at a variety of part-time teaching and tutoring jobs to augment his low salary at the Veteran's Program and eventually assumed the position of running the Tutorial Center at UCLA Educational Opportunity Program.

## Lila

Lila and her family immigrated from Mexico when she was four. When she began school, she failed the first grade. She was in remedial classes for five years. When her aunt and uncle found that she couldn't read, her family moved to Tulare County where the schools were better. She attended school there and picked crops in the agricultural fields during the summers. Lila did well in school and attended the MEME - Migrants Engaged in New Themes of Education at UCLA for six weeks one summer.

Lila met Mike Rose at UCLA. She was involved in helping low achieving students, even though she had herself been enrolled in the remedial English class. She also must write papers. Since Lila is from Mike's old neighborhood, they spend a lot of time talking. He had recently visited the area and tells her it is much worse than when he lived there. They talk about what it means to be designated a slow learner. Lila is able to escape because her parents moved her to a new school district and because she had the benefits of the six week program at UCLA. This allowed her to view herself in a more



positive way. Lila was able to cross the boundary and is able to share her experience with other students.

## **Laura**

Laura is a Mexican student who is from one of the poorest sections of Tijuana. Her father had been a food vendor. In Mexico, he had a white cart which he pushed across the city, selling food, where he could. At the age of six, she moved to the United States. She is attending UCLA and has just withdrawn from the remedial English class the author, Mike Rose, is teaching, for the fourth time. Before dropping the course for the fifth time, she discusses the situation with her professor. She feels she is a poor writer and freezes up when she has to write. She panics, stops attending the class and eventually drops the course.

## **Concepcion Baca**

Concepcion Baca was a student in Rose's first summer program. She quit UCLA in the middle of her sophomore year when she was on academic probation. She didn't like living away from home and couldn't decide on a major. She quit school, worked for several years and then began classes at another University of California campus. She majored in literature and graduated with high grades. When Mike met her again, she was in graduate school, a teaching assistant and close to the dissertation stage.

## **Jack MacFarland**

Jack MacFarland was a teacher at Our Lady of Mercy. Even though he had a master's degree from Columbia, he did not have the credentials to teach in the public system. He taught English at Our Lady of Mercy. MacFarland was a major influence on Mike Rose stimulating his interest in reading and writing.

## **Dr. Frank Carothers**

Dr. Frank Carothers was chair of the English Department. At Jack MacFarland's request, he acted as a mentor and special advisor to Mike Rose. Dr. Carothers and his family lived in Manhattan Beach and often had the English Society students, a club which he sponsored, out for barbecues.

## **Chip Anderson**

Chip Anderson was the director of the Veteran's Program, and the one who gave Rose his full time position. He left the Veteran's Program to become the director of the UCLA Educational Opportunity Program known as EOP. Chip offered Mike the opportunity to run the Tutorial Center.

## **Lillian**

Lillian is a volunteer in the Teacher Corps and a member of the team of which Mike is a part. She applied for a teaching job in El Monte after her stint in the Teacher Corps.

## **Rosalie Naumann**

Rosalie Naumann was a teacher at the elementary school in El Monte. She was the reading specialist and became Mike's master teacher at his request.

## **John Connor**

John Connor was a student whose parents moved to Oregon. He rented part of Mike's trailer and attended Loyola University with Mike,



## **Objects/Places**

### **Tijuana, Mexico**

Tijuana is a Mexican border city across from San Diego, California.

### **UCLA**

UCLA is the University of California Los Angeles branch located in Westwood, California.

### **Los Angeles**

Los Angeles, California is where the author was raised.

### **Our Lady of Mercy**

Our Lady of Mercy High School is in Los Angeles, about fifteen miles northwest of where Rose lived.

### **Loyola University**

Loyola University is located in Los Angeles and is where Mike Rose attended college.

### **Manhattan Beach**

Manhattan Beach is a suburb of Los Angeles where the home of Dr. Frank Carothers is located.

### **Sherry Terrace**

Sherry Terrace, on Glenrock Avenue, is an apartment complex where Rose lived while attending UCLA.

### **El Monte**

El Monte is a part of Los Angeles to which Rose's Teacher Corps team is assigned.



## **Veteran's Program**

The Veteran's Program was located in a building on the UCLA Los Angeles downtown campus.

## **Tutorial Center**

The Tutorial Center is located in Campbell Hall on the UCLA campus.

# Themes

## Hope

The major theme of the book is that there is hope. This is the message of the book and the overall point Rose is making. He, himself, is a symbol of hope despite the problems he had in school. Rose came from the poverty of South Los Angeles, the son of Italian immigrant parents. A mix up of records at the beginning of high school had him assigned to the Vocational Education program, which is basically for remedial students, instead of the college prep curriculum in which he belonged. This error was remedied during his junior year when he had an English teacher, Jack MacFarland, who became his mentor and helped him gain entrance to Loyola University. Recognizing that Mike needed special help, MacFarland arranged for some of the teachers at Loyola to mentor Rose. Mike managed to overcome his problems and perform well enough to receive a fellowship to UCLA, where he eventually received a masters degree. Rose spent two years teaching for the Teachers Corps in El Monte, where he came into contact with children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many were labeled remedial or retarded, but Rose found that their poor literacy skills were caused by other problems and that their performance improved as a result of individual attention. At the Veteran's Program, Rose was able to help veterans overcome their problems and improve their literacy skills. At the Tutorial Center, Rose worked with students from many diverse backgrounds and helped them overcome their problems. Many of them went on to achieve academic success. There is hope for many students that someone like Mike Rose will take an interest in them, figure out what their problem is, and then show them a way to solve their problem, so they can attain their academic goals. There is hope for them because there are people like Mike Rose in the American education system.

## Concern

Another theme of the book is that of concern. There is hope for many of the disadvantaged and unprepared because there are people like Mike Rose who are concerned and care about them. Rose succeeded academically because of the concern of people like Jack MacFarland and Frank Carothers. They functioned as mentors for him and helped him through the rough spots. Because of them, he made it through college and graduate school.

When Rose began to work in the Teacher Corps, he came into contact with many children from disadvantaged background that were labeled remedial or retarded because of their lack of reading and writing skills. Rose found they responded to special attention and one-on-one time and was able to help them improve their performance. Years later he worked with immigrants who had problems with the basis assessment tests. Their problem wasn't really illiteracy or lack of intelligence. Due to economic and cultural factors, they interpret the assessment test directions and questions differently.



Once he showed them what was expected of them, they were able to perform adequately on the test.

Rose was able to help these students out of an actual concern for them. He went out of his way to learn their problems to figure out what was causing their problems, whether this meant talking to them, visiting their homes or shooting baskets with them. The fact that he respected each person as an individual and cared about them enough to give of himself and his own time, allowed him to discover what the problem was and to find a way to help them. Many students went on to achieve their goals because of the concern of Mike Rose, just as Mike was successful because of the concern of MacFarland and Carothers.

## **Perseverance**

The third theme of the book is perseverance or hard work. People succeed academically due to their own perseverance and hard work. This is especially true of the disadvantaged and the unprepared students. They must obtain the skills they didn't develop earlier in school to succeed in college, so they must work harder than the average student. This was true of Mike Rose and it is true of other students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They require special help and attention and the sooner they receive it, the better off they are. Both Mike Rose and Lila are examples of this. Mike had a high school teacher, Jack MacFarland, take an interest in him and function as his mentor. This resulted in improved performance that allowed him to attend Loyola University. Mentors there assisted him and he obtained a fellowship to UCLA and eventually received his masters degree. This required a lot of hard work on his part, and he did quit at one point and spent two years in the Teacher Corps. In El Monte he worked with many disadvantaged children, many of whom were deemed to be remedial or retarded, but he didn't give up on them. He persevered in ascertaining what their problems were and in developing activities to which they could relate. The same was true of his work at the Veteran's Program and at the Tutorial Center.

This kind of perseverance is what is required to succeed, not only for Mike but for other people. Mike was able to motivate people to perform, just as MacFarland and Carothers, were able to motivate him. This took much time and hard work on the part of Rose. He spent a lot of time devising activities and curriculum that the students could relate to so he could reach them and help them. He never gave up on them. This is what perseverance is all about.

# Style

## Perspective

The perspective of the book is that of the author. It is his story mixed in with stories of his students. Since most of the book is autobiographical, it is written in the first person with the author serving as the narrator. 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 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 take an interest in a student personally and give special help, something that he himself was able to do for many students. The author has been in the position of many of the students he was able to help.

The first person point of view is very appropriate for this book due to its autobiographical nature. The author is telling of his experiences in education and with students of all ages and from different backgrounds. He also presents his views on the educational system from this perspective. The use of the first person makes the book more realistic and easier to relate to. Any other perspective would have made the book story-like and would have detracted from the emphasis of the book. The use of the first person gives the impression of the author talking directly to the reader. His personal experience and point of view combined with the stories of the students and the samples of their writing has a powerful effect on the reader and allows the author to make his point.

## Tone

The tone of the book is a mixture of subjective and objective. There are plenty of notes and citations for the many research studies and excerpts of writing that are presented in the book. The research studies are objectively presented and discussed. The subjective tone comes from the many personal views of the author that are presented throughout the book. He renders his opinions and views about the schools, programs and students, but this adds to rather than detracts from the book. Rose, himself, is from an impoverished background and had problems in school as a result. This, of course, makes him particularly sensitive to the needs of these kinds of people and he has spent his career working with these kinds of people. He is concerned with the lack of preparation that students receive from the educational system. But he and others have been able to overcome their backgrounds, which is the message of the book.

The tone adopted by the author is appropriate to the book. He presents and analyzes the problems he and others have had and discusses the ways that were devised to deal with the problems. The tone of the book shows the author as the concerned and caring person he is. He is interested in helping people which comes across in the book. Rose



doesn't mind giving of himself and his time to help people, which is why he was successful in what he did. This is what the tone of the book conveys while it shows the reader the problems of the unprepared student and how the educational system failed them. In spite of all the obstacles it is possible for the slow learners and the unprepared to succeed, and this is the message that the tone of the book conveys.

## Structure

The structure of the book is very simple. There are eight chapters, each covering a well-defined topic and/or period of the author's life. Interspersed throughout the book are the stories of his students. This sounds like it would be very confusing, but in actuality, it isn't. It helps the author illustrate the point he is discussing at the time. Also interspersed throughout the book are many samples of writing, some from literary works, others from students. Some of the samples are a page long. The author could have made his point with fewer samples of students' writings.

The book contains a Table of Contents and a well-developed Notes section and Bibliography, which makes it easy to look up the quotes. There is no Index to the book. The book is well written as would be expected from someone of the author's qualifications. He has the credentials and the experience to write a book of this kind and to express his own views.

The book is well worth reading and is relatively quick and easy reading. *LIVES ON THE BOUNDARY* will hold the interest of the reader due to the experiences of the author. There is some mention of theory and technical jargon, but it is well explained wherever it occurs in everyday English terms. The structure chosen by the author works well for the book, especially mixing the stories of the students with the author's own experiences and story. This makes the author's points more powerful on the reader. Any educator or student will be able to relate to the book and understand the points Rose is making and will be happy that he/she has read the book.

## Quotes

"This is a hopeful book about those who fail. Lives on the Boundary concerns language and human connection, literacy and culture, and it focuses on those who have trouble reading and writing in the schools and the workplace. It is a book about the abilities hidden by class and cultural barriers. And it is a book about movement: about what happens as people who have failed begin to participate in the educational system that has seemed so harsh and distant to them." (Preface, pg. xi)

"But the anger and frustration of South Vermont could prove too strong for music's illusion; then it was violence that provided deliverance of a different order." (Chapter 2, pg. 17)

"I certainly was not MacFarland's best student; most of the other guys in College Prep, even my fellow slackers, had better backgrounds than I did. But I worked very hard, for MacFarland had hooked me. He tapped my old interest in reading and creating stories. He gave me a way to feel special by using my mind. And he provided a role model that wasn't shaped on physical prowess alone, and something inside me that I wasn't quite aware of responded to that. Jack MacFarland established a literacy club, to borrow a phrase of Frank Smith's, and invited me - invited all of us - to join." (Chapter 2, pg. 34)

"And I was also gaining confidence that if I stayed with material long enough and kept asking questions, I would get it. That assurance proved to be more valuable than any particular body of knowledge I learned that year." (Chapter 3, pg. 51)

"Though my introduction to social science was not without its moments, graduate work in academic psychology wouldn't satisfy whatever vague thing it was that was fluttering within me. It would be a specialized and distant pursuit, no different, really, from studying the collected letters of a not-so-famous American author." (Chapter 4, pg. 83)

"Somewhere toward the end of October of that first year, Rosalie suggested that I alter my routine of observing and assisting and start working directly with some kids who could use the extra help. I suppose she thought I'd be excited by the idea, but I automatically said no: 'Isn't it too soon?' I asked, a little surprised at my reluctance. What if the kids didn't listen to me? I thought. What if, after all, I couldn't help them? I'd been protected up till now by Ben, by the safety of the team, by my observer status." (Chapter 5, pg. 93)

"Teaching, I was coming to understand, was a kind of romance. You didn't just work with words or a chronicle of dates or facts about the suspension of protein in milk. You wooed kids with these things, invited a relationship of sorts, the terms of connection being the narrative, the historical event, the balance of casein and water. Maybe nothing was "intrinsically interesting." Knowledge gained its meaning, at least initially, through a touch on the shoulder, through a conversation of the kind Jack MacFarland and Frank Carothers and the others used to have with their students. My first enthusiasm about writing came because I wanted a teacher to like me." (Chapter 5, pg. 102)



"We test them and assess them - even kindergartners are given an array of readiness measures - in order to determine what they know and don't know, can and can't do. The supreme irony, though, is that the very means we use to determine those needs - and the various remedial procedures that derive from them - can wreak profound harm on our children, usually, but by no means only, those who are already behind the economic and political eight ball." (Chapter 5, pg. 127)

"It was when I started thinking about why the men had come to the program that I found an answer, one that lay at the intersection of the veterans' lives and mine. The men wanted to change their lives, and for all their earlier failures, they still held onto an American dream: Education held the power to equalize things". (Chapter 6, pg. 137)

"No one could doubt the veterans' motivation; some were nearly feverish. But over my time with them, I had come to see how desire was only part of the equation. A number of the men - like me during my early schooling - had skated along the surface of true education, had read too little, were propelling themselves forward on the jet streams of fleeting dreams. So they did all the things that learners, working class to upper crust, do when they lose focus or get scared or give up: They withdrew or faked it or cheated or got stoned or stayed home or blew up." (Chapter 6, pg. 154)

"My involvement with counseling was marked by continuing opportunity to learn and by a strange draw toward more and more troubled people." (Chapter 6, pg. 158)

"Because of the complex mix of cognitive and cultural factors we've seen, the EOP student feels most strongly the effects of this impersonal, fragmented education; they, truly, were the least prepared for it, though not necessarily for the reasons the crisis reports would have us believe. But their difficulties served to illuminate, to throw into relief, the problems a great number of students - not just ours - were having. The struggles of the underprepared were revealing the needs of the many." (Chapter 7, pg. 202)

"Through all my experiences with people struggling to learn, the one thing that strikes me most is the ease with which we misperceive failed performance and the degree to which this misperception both reflects and reinforces the social order. Class and culture erect boundaries that hinder our vision - blind us to the logic of error and the ever present stirring of language - and encourage the designation of otherness, difference, deficiency." (Chapter 8, pg. 205)

"To nobody's surprise, Ruby and her classmates performed miserably. The tasks of the classroom were as unfamiliar as could be. There is a good deal of criticism of these sorts of reading tests, but one thing that is clear is that they reveal how well people can perform certain kinds of school activities. The activities themselves may be of questionable value, but they are interwoven with instruction and assessment, and entrance to many jobs is determined by them." (Chapter 8, pg. 217)

"Sitting with Lilia, our lives playing off each other, I realize that, finally, this is why the current perception of educational need is so limited: It substitutes terror for awe. But it is

not terror that fosters learning, it is hope, everyday heroics, the power of the common play of the human mind." (Epilogue, pg. 247)



## Topics for Discussion

What was the reason for the back-to-basics movement in American universities and colleges?

Why did Mike Rose's background cause him to have problems in school?

Why is it important for academically disadvantaged children to have a role model or mentor?

Why did Mike Rose drop out of the UCLA fellowship program?

What was the lesson of the two years in the Teacher's Corps in El Monte?

Explain why Mike Rose is a good teacher. What are the qualities that make him good?

What were the new challenges that Mike Rose faced at the Tutorial Center?