


3. Write an essay that develops your own position on what both Botstein and Thomas Hine write about as the age segregation of young people in high school. First, explain the perspective each offers and the consequences they believe follow from age segregation. Then, explain your own point of view on the issue, indicating whether you think their concern about the alienation of teenagers from adult society is a justifiable one.

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## CROSSING BOUNDARIES

 Mike Rose

Mike Rose is a professor of education at UCLA. He has worked for the past twenty years teaching and tutoring children and adults from what he calls America's "educational underclass"—working-class children, poorly educated Vietnam vets, underprepared college students, and adults in basic literacy programs. The following selection is from the chapter "Crossing Boundaries" in Rose's award-winning *Lives on the Boundary* (1989). This book is an intensely personal account of Rose's own life growing up in a Los Angeles ghetto and his struggles as an educator to make schooling more accessible to children and adults labeled "remedial," "illiterate," and "intellectually deficient." As the following selection indicates, throughout *Lives on the Boundary*, Rose is especially interested in the "politics and sociology of school failure."

### SUGGESTION FOR READING

The following selection is separated into three parts. To help you think about how these parts combine to form a whole (or whether they do), underline and annotate as you read and note the focus of each section and how it provides a commentary on the other sections.

I myself I thank God for the dream to come back to school and to be able to seek the dream I want, because I know this time I will try and make my dream come true.

- 1 Each semester the staff of the Bay Area literacy program we're about to visit collects samples of their students' writing and makes books for them. You can find an assortment on an old bookshelf by the coordinator's desk. The booklets are simple: mimeographed, faint blue stencil, stapled, dog-eared. There are uneven drawings on the thin paper covers: a bicycle leaning against a tree, the Golden Gate Bridge, an Aubrey Beardsley sketch. The stories are about growing up, raising children, returning—sadly or with anticipation—to hometowns, to Chicago or St. Louis or to a sweep of rural communities in the South. Many of the stories are about work: looking for work, losing work, wanting better work. And many more are about coming back to school. Coming back to school.

Some of these writers haven't been in a classroom in thirty years.

The stories reveal quite a range. Many are no longer than a paragraph, their sentences simple and repetitive, tenuously linked by *and* and *then* and *anyway*. There are lots of grammar and spelling errors and problems with sentence boundaries—in a few essays, periods come where commas should be or where no punctuation is needed at all: "It was hard for me to stay in school because I was allway sick. and that was verry hard for me." Or, "I sound better. now that my boys are grown." Papers of this quality are written, for the most part, by newcomers, people at the end of their first semester. But other papers—quite a few, actually—are competent. They tend to come from those who have received a year or more of instruction. There are still problems with grammar and sentence fragments and with spelling, since the writers are using a wider, more ambitious vocabulary.

Problems like these take longer to clear up, but the writers are getting more adept at rendering their experience in print, at developing a narrative, at framing an illustration, at turning a phrase in written language:

The kitchen floor was missing some of its tiles and had not been kissed with water and soap for a long time.

The [teacher] looked for a moment, and then said, "All the students wishing to be accounted for, please be seated."

A minute went by, then a tough looking Mexican boy got up, and walked to the teacher with a knife in his hand. When he got to the desk he said, "I'm here teacher! My name is Robert Gomez." With that he put the knife away, and walked over and found a seat.

Back in the jaws of despair, pain, and the ugly scars of the defeated parents he loved. Those jaws he had struggled free of when he had moved out and away when he was eighteen years old.

... the wind was howling, angry, whirling.

A few new students also created such moments, indicators of what they'll be able to do as they become more fluent writers, as they develop some control over and confidence in establishing themselves on paper:

[I used to have] light, really light Brown eyes, like Grasshopper eyes. which is what some peoples used to call me. Grasshopper, or Grasshopper eyes. . . . I decided one Day to catch a Grasshopper. and look at its eye to be sure of the color.

It was early in the morning just before dawn. Big Red, the sun hasn't showed its face in the heaven. The sky had that midnight blue look. The stars losing their shine.

There are about eight or ten of these stapled collections, a hundred and fifty or so essays. Five years' worth. An archive scattered across an old bookcase. There's a folding chair close by. I've been sitting in it for some time now, reading one book, then another, story after story. Losing track. Drifting in and out of lives. Wondering about grasshopper eyes, about segregated

schools, wanting to know more about this journey to the West looking for work. Slowly something has been shifting in my perception: the errors—the weird commas and missing letters, the fragments and irregular punctuation—they are ceasing to be slips of the hand and brain. They are becoming part of the stories themselves. They are the only fitting way, it seems, to render dislocation—shacks and field labor and children lost to the inner city—to talk about parents you long for, jobs you can't pin down. Poverty has generated its own damaged script, scars manifest in the spelling of a word. ✨ ✨ ✨

5 < This is the prose of America's underclass. > ✨

The writers are those who got lost in our schools, who could not escape neighborhoods that narrowed their possibilities, who could not enter the job market in any ascendent way. They are locked into unskilled and semiskilled jobs, live in places that threaten their children, suffer from disorders and handicaps they don't have the money to treat. Some have been unemployed for a long time. But for all that, they remain hopeful, have somehow held onto a deep faith in education. They have come back to school. Ruby, the woman who wrote the passage that opens this section, walks unsteadily to the teacher's desk—the arthritis in her hip goes unchecked—with a paper in her hand. She looks over her shoulder to her friend, Alice: "I ain't givin' up the ship this time," she says and winks, "though, Lord, I might drown with it." The class laughs. They understand.

It is a very iffy thing, this schooling. But the participants put a lot of stock in it. They believe school will help them, and they are very specific about what they want: a high school equivalency, or the ability to earn seven dollars an hour. One wants to move from being a nurse's aide to a licensed vocational nurse, another needs to read and write and compute adequately enough to be self-employed as a car painter and body man. They remind you of how fundamentally important it is—not just to your pocket but to your soul as well—to earn a decent wage, to have a steady job, to be just a little bit in control of your

wage not just about pocket, but soul

Belief in school

skills tested are  
school skills

economic life. The goals are specific, modest, but they mean a tremendous amount for the assurance they give to these people that they are still somebody, that they can exercise control. Thus it is that talk of school and a new job brings forth such expansive language, as soaring as any humanist's testament to the glory of the word: "I thank God to be able to seek the dream I want. . . ." For Ruby and her classmates the dream deferred neither dried up like a raisin in the sun, nor has it exploded. It has emerged again—for it is so basic—and it centers on schooling. "I admire and respect knowledge and those that have it are well blessed," writes another student. "My classmates are a swell group because they too have a dream and they too are seeking knowledge and I love them for that."

Sitting in the classroom with Ruby, Alice, and the rest, you think, at times, that you're at a revival meeting. There is so much testifying. Everybody talks and writes about dreams and goals and "doing better for myself." This is powerful, edifying—but something about it, its insistence perhaps, is a little bit discordant. The exuberance becomes jittery, an almost counterphobic boosting and supporting. It is no surprise, then, that it alternates with despair. In their hearts, Ruby and her classmates know how tenuous this is, how many times they've failed before. Somebody says something about falling down. Sally says, "I've felt that too. Not falling down on my legs or knees, but falling down within me." No wonder they sermonize and embrace. It's not just a few bucks more a week that's at stake; literacy, here, is intimately connected with respect, with a sense that they are not beaten, the mastery of print revealing the deepest impulse to survive.

When they entered the program, Ruby and Alice and Sally and all the rest were given several tests, one of which was a traditional reading inventory. The test had a section on comprehension—relatively brief passages followed by multiple-choice questions—and a series of sections that tested particular reading skills: vocabulary,

syllabication, phonics, prefixes and roots. The level of the instrument was pretty sophisticated, and the skills it tested are the kind you develop in school: answering multiple-choice questions, working out syllable breaks, knowing Greek and Latin roots, all that. What was interesting about this group of test takers was that—though a few were barely literate—many could read and write well enough to get along, and, in some cases, to help those in their communities who were less skilled. They could read, with fair comprehension, simple news articles, could pay bills, follow up on sales and coupons, deal with school forms for their kids, and help illiterate neighbors in their interactions with the government. Their skills were pretty low-level and limited profoundly the kinds of things they could read or write, but they lived and functioned amid print. The sad thing is that we don't really have tests of such naturally occurring competence. The tests we do have, like the one Ruby and the others took, focus on components of reading ability tested in isolation (phonetic discrimination, for example) or on those skills that are school-oriented, like reading a passage on an unfamiliar topic unrelated to immediate needs: the mating habits of the dolphin, the Mayan pyramids. Students then answer questions on these sorts of passages by choosing one of four or five possible answers, some of which may be purposely misleading.

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. Because of their centrality, then, I wanted to get some sense of how the students went about taking the tests. What happened as they tried to meet the test's demands? How was it that they failed?

Here is the question that guides research

Reading Test

10 My method was simple. I chose four students and had each of them take sections of the test again, asking them questions as they did so, encouraging them to talk as they tried to figure out an item.

The first thing that emerged was the complete foreignness of the task. A sample item in the prefixes and roots section (called Word Parts) presented the word “unhappy,” and asked the testtaker to select one of four other words “which gives the meaning of the underlined part of the first word.” The choices were *very, glad, sad, not*. Though the person giving the test had read through the instructions with the class, many still could not understand, and if they chose an answer at all, most likely chose *sad*, a synonym for the whole word *unhappy*.

Nowhere in their daily reading are these students required to focus on parts of words in this way. The multiple-choice format is also unfamiliar—it is not part of day-to-day literacy—so the task as well as the format is new, odd. I explained the directions again—read them slowly, emphasized the sample item—but still, three of the four students continued to fall into the test maker’s trap of choosing synonyms for the target word rather than zeroing in on the part of the word in question. Such behavior is common among those who fail in our schools, and it has led some commentators to posit that students like these are cognitively and linguistically deficient in some fundamental way: They process language differently, or reason differently from those who succeed in school, or the dialect they speak in some basic way interferes with their processing of Standard Written English.

Certainly in such a group—because of malnourishment, trauma, poor health care, environmental toxins—you’ll find people with neurolinguistic problems or with medical difficulties that can affect perception and concentration. And this group—ranging in age from nineteen to the mid-fifties—has a wide array of medical complications: diabetes, head injury,

hypertension, asthma, retinal deterioration, and the unusual sleep disorder called narcolepsy. It would be naive to deny the effect of all this on reading and writing. But as you sit alongside these students and listen to them work through a task, it is not damage that most strikes you. Even when they’re misunderstanding the test and selecting wrong answers, their reasoning is not distorted and pathological. Here is Millie, whose test scores placed her close to the class average—and average here would be very low just about anywhere else.

Millie is given the word “kilometer” and the following list of possible answers:

- a. thousand
- b. hundred
- c. distance
- d. speed

15 She responds to the whole word—*kilometer*—partially because she still does not understand how the test works, but also, I think, because the word is familiar to her. She offers *speed* as the correct answer because: “I see it on the signs when I be drivin’.” She starts to say something else, but stops abruptly. “Whoa, it don’t have to be ‘speed’—it could be ‘distance.’ ”

“It could be ‘distance,’ couldn’t it?” I say.

“Yes, it could be one or the other.”

“Okay.”

“And then again,” she says reflectively, “it could be a number.”

20 Millie tapped her knowledge of the world—she had seen *kilometer* on road signs—to offer a quick response: *speed*. But she saw just as quickly that her knowledge could logically support another answer (*distance*), and, a few moments later, saw that what she knew could also support a third answer, one related to number. What she lacked was specific knowledge of the Greek prefix *kilo*, but she wasn’t short on reasoning ability. In fact, reading tests like the one Millie took are constructed in such a way as to trick you into relying on commonsense reasoning and world knowledge—and thereby

choosing a wrong answer. Take, for example, this item:

Cardiogram

- a. heart
- b. abnormal
- c. distance
- d. record

Millie, and many others in the class, chose *heart*. To sidestep that answer, you need to know something about the use of *gram* in other such words (versus its use as a metric weight), but you need to know, as well, how these tests work.

After Millie completed five or six items, I had her go back over them, talking through her answers with her. One item that had originally given her trouble was “extraordinary”: a) “beyond”; b) “acute”; c) “regular”; d) “imagined.” She had been a little rattled when answering this one. While reading the four possible answers, she stumbled on “imagined”: “I . . . im . . .”; then, tentatively, “imaged”; a pause again, then “imagine,” and, quickly, “I don’t know that word.”

I pronounce it.

She looks up at me, a little disgusted: “I said it, didn’t I?”

25 “You did say it.”

“I was scared of it.”

Her first time through, Millie had chosen *regular*, the wrong answer—apparently locking onto *ordinary* rather than the underlined prefix *extra*—doing just the opposite of what she was supposed to do. It was telling, I thought, that Millie and two or three others talked about words scaring them.

When we came back to “extraordinary” during our review, I decided on strategy. “Let’s try something,” I said. “These tests are set up to trick you, so let’s try a trick ourselves.” I take a pencil and do something the publishers of the test tell you not to do: I mark up the test booklet. I slowly begin to circle the prefix *extra*, saying, “This is the part of the word we’re concerned with, right?” As soon as I finish she smiles and says “beyond,” the right answer.

“Did you see what happened there?” I said.

“As soon as I circled the part of the word, you saw what it meant.”

30 “I see it,” she says. “I don’t be thinking about what I’m doing.”

I tell her to try what I did, to circle the part of the word in question, to remember that trick, for with tests like this, we need a set of tricks of our own.

“You saw it yourself,” I said.

“Sure did. It was right there in front of me—cause the rest of them don’t even go with ‘extra.’”

I had been conducting this interview with Millie in between her classes, and our time was running out. I explained that we’d pick this up again, and I turned away, checking the wall clock, reaching to turn off the tape recorder. Millie was still looking at the test booklet.

35 “What is this word right here?” she asked.

She had gone ahead to the other, more difficult, page of the booklet and was pointing to “egocentric.”

I take my finger off the recorder’s STOP button. “Let’s circle it,” I say. “What’s that word? Say it.”

“Ego.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Ego. Oh my.” She scans the four options—*self, head, mind, kind*—and says “self.”

40 “Excellent!”

“You know, when I said ‘ego,’ I tried to put it in a sentence: ‘My ego,’ I say. That’s *me*.”

I ask her if she wants to look at one more. She goes back to “cardiogram,” which she gets right this time. Then to “thermometer,” which she also gets right. And “bifocal,” which she gets right without using her pencil to mark the prefix. Once Millie saw and understood what the test required of her, she could rely on her world knowledge to help her reason out some answers.

Cognitive psychologists talk about task representation, the way a particular problem is depicted or reproduced in the mind. Something shifted in Millie’s conception of her task, and it had a powerful effect on her performance.

→ other part of literacy → rhetorical context

need to know how these tests work as well as school-related skills

FEAR

figure out what's needed to encourage performance, that if you watch and listen, again and again there will emerge evidence of ability that escapes those who dwell on differences.

Ironically, it's often the reports themselves of our educational inadequacies—the position papers and media alarms on illiteracy in America—that help blind us to cognitive and linguistic possibility. Their rhetorical thrust and their metaphor conjure up disease or decay or economic and military defeat: A malignancy has run wild, an evil power is consuming us from within. (And here reemerges that nineteenth-century

moral terror.) It takes such declamation to turn the moneyed wheels of government, to catch public attention and entice the givers of grants, but there's a dark side to this political reality. The character of the alarms and, too often, the character of the responses spark in us the urge to punish, to extirpate, to return to a precancerous golden age rather than build on the rich capacity that already exists. The reports urge responses that reduce literate possibility and constrain growth, that focus on pathology rather than on possibility. Philosophy, said Aristotle, begins in wonder. So does education.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What motivates students such as Ruby, Alice, Sally, and Millie to return to school? What assumptions do they seem to make about the effects of education? Are these assumptions realistic? How do they compare with the assumptions you and your classmates make about the effects of education? Explain what you see as differences and similarities.
2. How does Rose explain poor performance and failure in school? Don't settle for generalizations such as "poverty and cultural dislocation." Look closely at how Rose analyzes Millie's experience with questions on a reading comprehension test. Do you find Rose's explanations persuasive? What do these explanations imply about the nature and function of schooling in America?
3. Rose says that "nineteenth-century American educators" looked at their "mission" as a "fundamentally moral one." Later he suggests that such a "moralistic strain still exists" in the way Americans think about education and that it can "spark in us the urge to punish, to extirpate, to return to a precancerous golden age." What is the nature of the "moral terror" Rose talks about? Do you agree with him? Draw upon your experience in school to respond to this question.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Write an essay that explains what Mike Rose sees as causes of failure in school. Compare his explanation with your own views on what causes students to fail. Draw on your own experience and what you have observed.
2. Most students have been "punished" at some point or another during their schooling. Write an essay that tells the story of a time when you were (or someone you know was) "punished" in school. What did you do? Did you break a rule? Was the rule fair? Was the "punishment" just or unjust? Your story should tell about what happened and how you felt about it. Then use the story to reflect on what the incident reveals about life in school and how students encounter and deal with the "rules" of schooling.
3. Rose says that "reports [of] . . . our educational inadequacies—the position papers and media alarms on illiteracy in America—" reduce "literate possibility and constrain growth." Write an essay that considers Rose's claim that such reports "focus on pathology rather than on possibility." You'll need to find a report or a media account of literacy and American education. You can draw on reports from the past, such as *A Nation at Risk* (1993), which you can find in the library, or more recent ones online. Web sites