

## **“I Just Wanna Be Average”—Mike Rose**

### **Summary:**

In “I Just Wanna Be Average,” Mike Rose recounts his years in vocational school, also known as the bottom level classes. Rose was placed in these classes by accident, but decided to keep his enrollment with the lower level students. Rose goes in depth about his teachers, fellow classmates, and observations throughout his essay. He explains that his teachers act like they could care less about teaching their students and instead use physical violence or a lack of lesson plans to control them. Rose also notes the various personalities of his classmates. He comments that many of them have no desire to learn and are notorious for slacking off, partying, and getting into fights. Although these kids seem to be a mess, Rose notes special qualities about them that show their true personalities and that they aren’t just troublemakers. One classmate that really stood out to Rose was Ken Harvey, who when asked for an opinion about working hard to reach achievement, said he just ‘wanted to be average.’ Rose expands on this statement by explaining why he thinks this, and how crazy and confusing life is while in your school years, and that by embracing average standards, kids can catch their breath and just live and move on. As Rose puts it, ‘Reject the confusion and frustration by openly defining yourself as the common Joe.’ (187). Rose questions this concept and realizes that when he eventually moves out of the vocational program, he had a similar attitude to that of Harvey’s and wasn’t sure how to survive in a typical school setting. Later in his life, Rose’s father dies and he is left alone. At this point, a new teacher named Mr. MacFarland comes to teach senior English at Rose’s school. He is described as disorderly and eccentric. Rose comes to find that he deeply admires MacFarland because he genuinely cares for his students and pushes them to work hard. Rose finds himself more interested in school than ever, and eventually MacFarland convinces him to pursue a college education. Through hard work and the support of MacFarland, Rose ends up going to college while also finding himself and who he truly is.

### **The Big Ideas:**

- Motivation (or lack thereof) in school
- Reflection on one’s education
- Pivotal moments in life can alter one’s learning experience
- Teaching methods greatly effect the way students learn
- Students often feel that they only want to be average

### **Connections:**

Kohl’s essay “I Won’t Learn From You” is actually very relatable to Rose’s “I Just Wanna Be Average.” Rose illustrates that students are products of the environments they’re in. In the anecdote of his early education in vocational education, Mike Rose depicts himself as a very average student skating by unnoticed through most of his classes because he can. He is not at all limited by his intelligence but by his environment and he himself being a vocational education student. No one expects the students to do well, that’s why they are in the program they are in. Kohl’s concept of not-learning can be applied here as well. The students in vocational education have much lower expectations and therefore do poorly because that’s what is expected of them. There is a

choice on some level, but the students are mostly following the expectations the school has set in place. Because the students are choosing to not learn as well as they can, they remain in vocational education. This vicious cycle is the one Kohl describes in his essay and how perpetual misunderstanding between student and teacher takes place.

**Quotes:**

- “Students will float to the mark you set.” (185)
- “I am holding a picture of him. He is sitting in his wheelchair and smiling at the camera. The smile appears forced, unsteady, seems to quaver, though it is frozen in silver nitrate.” (189)
- “Knowledge was becoming a bonding agent. Within a year or two, the persona of the disaffected hipster would prove too cynical, too alienated to last. But for a time it was new and exciting: it provided a critical perspective on society, and it allowed me to act as though I were living beyond the limiting boundaries of South Vermont.” (192)

**Recommendation:**

The essay “I Just Wanna Be Average” by Mike Rose spurs many interesting questions about motivation in education, both for the teacher and the student. If being average is good enough why try any harder? Rose talks about this major issue in the K-12 school system while taking the reader through his personal educational experience. He uses his own experience and his classmates’ experiences to exemplify how students can slide easily through school by getting a passing grade and not and nothing more. This essay is particularly useful if you are interested in discussing how different aspects of a student’s background affect his or her performance in school. It’s an anecdote from a teacher and scholar who fights to exploit the untapped potential students from underprivileged backgrounds they have hidden inside them.

**Questions:**

- Why do students “float”? Is this involuntary? Is it effortless?
- Who sets the mark? Teachers? Parents? Government?
- Why was Rose's father important in Rose's life?
- When his father dies, what does that do for Rose in school?
- What can we learn from Rose's unfortunate experiences?
- Did school teach him this relationship he had with knowledge?
- What does it mean to have a ‘critical perspective on society’?