In this multicultural society called America, the land of opportunity, there are children growing up in ghettos, on street corners, or in the houses of willing family members or friends. Traditional schooling provides them less learning experience than other agencies. For Maya Angelou and Luis Rodriguez, education came from sources such as friends, mentors, and extended family. Their experiences outside the classroom provided the greatest means of true education, the ability to express themselves in a way never before envisioned by either individual. Each was able to finagle a foothold away from the prison of their respective, disenfranchised race; they fought to maintain a semblance of strength and stability in histories that were too painful to face. They did so through agencies that provided homeostasis amidst instability.

Angelou received little support in the school system. Rather, her education came largely through experiences with extended family and mentors. Her source of inspiration appeared to come from one special teacher, Miss Kirwin. Angelou describes her as “a brilliant teacher…that rare educator who was in love with information” (215). Throughout her experiences in the South with her grandmother, Angelou realized that being black made her different. It did not matter that she loved learning. She was different. Miss Kirwin taught her that she deserved respect, not because her answers were correct or her skin was the right color; she deserved respect because every human being deserves it. For the first time in her life, Maya was not a victim, not the member of an oppressed race. She was just Miss Johnson. Where other teachers aimed to intimidate their students in order to command respect, Miss Kirwin “was stimulating instead of intimidating” (216). Kirwin taught Maya that she could be appreciated for what she could bring to discussion and that fostered a sense of worth that Maya had not experienced before. One mentor in particular also influenced a sense of worth in Luis Rodriguez.

For Rodriguez, life in the barrio became inescapable. He had dropped out of school, been jailed countless times, and learned to survive; he did not learn to live, but merely to survive. His primary means of education was the advice of others, important figureheads such as Chente. Rodriguez learned that change, “follows laws of development, a process that, if appreciated, sets the conditions by which people make their own history” (185). Chente taught him that he did not have to merely become another statistic in the barrio; he could carve his own difficult path out of despair. Chente showed faith in Rodriguez when everyone else, including his family, gave up. He bailed Rodriguez out of jail, maintained their friendship
regardless of circumstances; he was able to see past the learned destructive behavior to see the potential behind the walls.

Chente taught Luis that there was a larger world to conquer than his little town. He taught Luis that gang wars were meaningless, merely fruitless attempts to squelch the pain of being “different”. But killing each other did not make the pain go away. It merely produced a temporary anesthetic, a focus for the rage of being singled out and tossed aside as yesterday’s garbage. Luis had been thrown away because he was Mexican, hidden in a corner from his first experiences in the classroom. Chente was Luis’s one-way ticket out of life’s injustices, an unwavering support system that Luis had never experienced. Luis learned to “live a deliberate existence dedicated to a future humanity which might in complete freedom achieve the realization of its creative impulses, the totality of its potential faculties” (243). In creating his own history, he learned to live dedicated to the future, the future of other “hopeless” children like his son.

There are children throughout the world in situations that do not provide them the means of a traditional education. They either cannot attend school or have been so violated by the system that they never wish to return. But this does not mean they do not learn. Rather, their modes of learning come through different agencies, sometimes other street kids, sometimes mentors who take the time to treat them as human beings, not trash. Cremin’s article points out that education produces outcomes that are both intended and unintended. For Rodriguez and Angelou, their mentors instilled in them a sense of worth regardless of their skin color. This was largely unintentional, as both Miss Kirwin and Chente were merely attempting to teach their pupils that they could have other perspectives on the world. Their examples, however, produced an education that continued to flourish within both authors. Once they recognized their own intrinsic value, not as a person of color, but as a human worthy of respect, each was able to create a new “identity” and move forward out of difficult pasts. They were able to shake the chains of mediocrity and violence and forge a new destiny.