

**Teetering at the Fulcrum:
Possibilities and Constraints in a College Worker Education Program**

by

Emily Schnee

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

2007

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

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This dissertation explores the impact of college on adult students enrolled in a union-supported worker education program at an urban public university. Using qualitative research methods, including the writing of educational memoirs by research participants, this dissertation examines the impact of students' educational biographies on their college experiences and explores the ways in which the worker education program functions to produce successful college outcomes for non-traditional students.

Specifically, this research explores the mobility desires and dilemmas of adult college students and, in considering their lack of career advancement, theorizes alternate explanations for their persistence in school. The research further examines the roots of students' academic motivation and explores the ways in which students' racial identities serve as a deep source of academic motivation despite the negative effects of exclusionary acts based on race and class, within schools, which acted to diminish their high academic aspirations as youth. This dissertation further examines the connections between student experience and school context and explores the complex relationship between care and academic rigor in the worker education program. It reveals the ways in which care is both central to adult students' academic

success and implicated in challenges to achieving rigorous academic standards for under-prepared college students. This research explores the role of race, class, and gender in determining academic expectations and outcomes and highlights the crucial role of institutional constraints to implementing rigorous education for non-traditional students.

This research also considers the possibilities and limits of enacting education for social change and poses lessons to be learned from this one small educational site as it attempts to live out its commitment to equal access and outcomes in higher education and simultaneously practice education for transformation. Lastly, this dissertation explores the use of personal narrative writing by research participants in qualitative research and examines the impact writing their educational memoirs had on students' understanding of their educational journeys.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, my heartfelt thanks go out to the WEP students – Brenda, Ivy, Carmen, Deborah, April, Florence, Phyllis, Sandra, Rosa, Gillian, Lisa, Nelly, Samuel and William – who participated in my research. Thank you for sharing your stories, for giving your time, for modeling what it means to be an adult student. Without each and every one of you – your generosity, your insight, your commitment to learning – this project would have been impossible.

I send warm thanks and appreciation to all the unnamed WEP faculty and staff who gave so generously and graciously of their time as well. Without your deep insights and passionate commitment to adult worker education this would be a much poorer work.

I thank Sondra Perl, the chair of my dissertation committee, for long years of support, encouragement, and friendship without which this dissertation would only be a dream. You have given more of yourself than I could have imagined or asked for over the long haul of conceiving and birthing this piece. I will always remember with gratitude and affection the treks to your home, kids in tow, where you offered Legos and supportive feedback with equal measures of grace and good cheer. A heartfelt thanks to Michelle Fine who offered her keen wisdom and abundant praise when I most needed them. Your insights and encouraging words nourished me when I doubted I had something important to say and pushed me onward whenever I felt stuck. Thank you to Jean Anyon who never let me forget that education is more than what happens in a classroom and, through her work, laid a foundation for education for social change upon which my own research rests.

Very warm and special thanks to Lori Chajet who read every word and always offered smart, kind, constructive feedback. Without your input this would be a much poorer work. You are a friend and colleague extraordinaire without whom I might not have made it through graduate school. A big thanks to Janice Bloom for her detailed, careful, thoughtful feedback which always helped me to move forward. Your friendship made writing this a much more pleasant and rewarding task. Thanks to Eve Tuck and Jen Weiss whose insightful feedback spurred me on in the early stages of writing and thinking. Kathleen Nolan and Michael Dumas were there in the beginning asking important questions, always providing critique and support.

I thank Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz for her unstinting support, lavish praise, and constant encouragement. This would not have been possible without your paving the way. A special thanks to June Cumberbatch, who cheerfully fielded my every request and facilitated my access to both the students and the site. Neither the program, nor my research, would be the same without you. I thank Greg Mantsios for making the worker education program a place to which I could bring my questions and ideas. Thanks to Joanne Mason who shared her data so willingly.

And last, but certainly not least, I extend my thanks and love to Carlos, Camilo, and Benjamin who spent many evenings without me so that I could pursue this degree, who remind me every day why education matters, who are my best teachers, and to whom I dedicate my life.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Nelly brought her college ID, covered with semester after semester of differently colored validation stickers, proud of each one. Gillian brought a photo of herself and some classmates on an environmental science class field trip. That was the semester she “almost died” getting up at seven on Saturday mornings to travel to the outer reaches of the Bronx to test contaminated water. Samuel brought a paper produced as a group product, notable both for the A+ he had received and the fact that working collaboratively with his classmates had proven energizing and satisfying. Ivy brought her high school yearbook and almost cried when describing how unhappy she had been as a student at that point in her life. (Field note, 3/12/04)

These educational artifacts represent the bittersweet journey of adult students to, and through, the world of higher education. Symbols of growth and pride, they also reveal the painful underside of adult college students’ voyages to degree completion decades after traditional-aged students don their caps and gowns. This dissertation explores the paths adult students at the Worker Education Program (WEP) have charted in their pursuit of higher education. It considers the impact of students’ educational biographies on their college experiences and explores how students come to understand what a college education means. This research examines the ways in which a small program, like WEP, can make a difference in the educational trajectories of non-traditional college students and analyzes the impact of larger forces that constrain both students’ achievement of their educational aspirations and WEP’s fulfillment of its educational mission. Finally, this research reflects upon the use of memoir writing by research participants as both pedagogy and research method.

Worker Education Program

The Worker Education Program is a union-supported college degree program for working adults that is part of the public university system in New York City. Students at WEP receive a liberal arts education, in either urban or labor studies, that attempts to connect higher education to a vision of social change. In its promotional literature, WEP describes itself as committed to “opportunity, support, and empowerment” for adult worker education students. Not only does WEP provide union members college access through active recruitment and generous tuition assistance via their unions, the program is specifically designed to meet the needs of adult learners. From their initial contact with the program until graduation, students receive multiple supports in the form of extensive advisement and counseling, a small program and intimate classes, and academic assistance for those students who are under-prepared. WEP is philosophically committed to liberal arts education through a social science oriented urban and labor studies curriculum, the development of critical thinking, and the fostering of civic participation (Worker Education Five Year Plan). Included in the program goals are providing students with a “broader understanding of government and urban issues” and engaging them in “generat[ing] new ideas for social change” (Worker Education brochure). Although vaguely and imperfectly defined, interpreted and enacted differently by all concerned, the program mission assumes education has transformative potential and attempts to link higher education to efforts for collective social change. How these lofty and often elusive goals are, and are not, lived out and understood by students in the program is an important strand of my research.

Contrary to the conventional image of a college student, a typical WEP student – like many of my research participants – is a middle-aged black woman with children who works full-time. According to internal program data, 87% of the undergraduates enrolled in spring 2004 were female and their average age was forty-five years. Although the program does not track the race or ethnicity of students, more than 80% of my research participants identified racially as black; over half are African-American, another 24% come from the English-speaking Caribbean, and 14% are Latino/a. The vast majority of WEP students are civil servants employed as clerical and secretarial workers by a variety of New York City agencies. Students must be union members to be eligible for admission to the program; in the fall 2004 semester, 61.5% of WEP undergraduates were members of just two union locals representing municipal employees (those with the most generous tuition assistance programs). Having spent several decades out of school, students often come to WEP academically unprepared for college work. According to CUNY's entrance exams, two-thirds of my research participants required academic remediation – most frequently in math. In the ten years the worker education program has been tracking student retention and graduation rates, the median number of years it took students to graduate (including those who transferred in with previous college credits) was six, although many students, including one-third of my research participants, take much longer. The ten year worker education graduation rate¹ for attaining a Bachelor's degree hovers around 25%. This highlights both the immense challenges of degree

¹ Worker Education data includes students at the off-site worker education program and those admitted under the aegis of worker education but enrolled and attending classes on the college's main campus. My research looks exclusively at students enrolled in the off-site worker education program, a sub-program of Worker Education.

completion for students like those at WEP (Omolade, 1994) and illuminates the value of documenting the experiences of those who remain and complete their college educations.

Higher Education Context

When seen in the national context of higher education access and attainment for non-traditional students, the significance of programs like WEP becomes clearer. Although more than 95% of high school students report that they plan to attend college (Rosenbaum, 2001), in 2001 just over half of all Latino and African American high school graduates actually enrolled in higher education (Education Trust, 2006). Of those African-American and Latino students who do begin college, fewer than half graduate with a degree in six years (Education Trust, 2006). Low-income students fare equally poorly in postsecondary education: only 7% of young people from families in the poorest quarter of the population achieve a college degree by age twenty-six (Education Trust, 2006). Thus, it is not surprising that only 17% of African-Americans and 11% of Latinos over twenty five years of age hold college degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2006a; 2006b). Clearly, the breach between college aspirations and attainment is a large one for many students who are demographically similar to those at WEP.

Yet, at the same time, non-traditional students are becoming more the norm in the United States today, particularly at urban public colleges and universities. A growing number, like my research participants, are first-generation college students and/or racial and ethnic minorities. Between 1980 – 81 and 2000 - 01, minority enrollment in college increased by more than 122% (American Council on Education,

2003) and, in 1992, fifty-nine percent of high school graduates whose parents had never gone to college enrolled in postsecondary education (NCES, 2001).

Furthermore, eighty percent of college students work an average of 30 hours per week (King, 2006), about one-third are over age twenty-four, and forty percent attend college part-time (US Department of Education, 2006). Thus, the experiences of WEP students hold powerful lessons for the many students like them who aspire to receive a college degree.

A plethora of educational research has focused on documenting and seeking explanations for the race- and class-based disparities in postsecondary outcomes cited above. This dissertation explores what happens to non-traditional students' academic aspirations and achievement as they journey through schools and poses lessons to be learned from one small program's commitment to college access and outcomes for working class adult college students. This research takes seriously the possibility of educational spaces to mediate ingrained inequities in educational access and outcomes by highlighting the stories of those who've succeeded and the program that facilitated their success.

Research Agenda

Although many WEP students drop and stop out each semester, I focused my research on those who've stayed and pursued a college education despite, or perhaps because of, the odds against them, precisely because they have something important to teach us about why vulnerable college students stay in school and what enables them to do so. As a former teacher in WEP, I developed a research question – and process – that would bring to the surface what I saw everyday in my classrooms –

intelligent, curious, sometimes struggling students who were committed to getting a college degree. I wanted to uncover what their college education meant to them, why they pursued it, often at great sacrifice, and where it fit in their overall educational journeys. I sensed that it was more, and less, than the “common sense” notions of why adults return to school – social and economic mobility – although clearly this was part of it. I knew my students made huge sacrifices to get their degrees, and experienced limited economic returns. This research aims to understand what brought these students back to education, what kept them coming, and why – from the students’ points of view.

I also set out to explore the intersection of these academically successful adult college students and this particular educational space – a union-supported college degree program specifically designed for working adults. I wanted to know how students understood the non-traditional pedagogy and socially conscious liberal arts curriculum, how they made sense of the labor and urban studies majors, how the program goals merged with, or contradicted their own, in returning to school. I aimed to understand the specific ways in which this program supported students’ academic success when, in many cases, these same students had failed in their attempts at college several times before. I located WEP as a site of educational possibility, with all its constraints and contradictions, in order to explore how the microcosm of this one program might reveal insights and implications for the many non-traditional college students who attend institutions of higher education in the United States today.

I locate this research at the fulcrum of possibility and constraint. Making transparent the lofty aims of possibility shows the complexity of WEP's mission at the same time it underscores the importance of alternative educational spaces to spark our imaginations and push the limits of what is considered possible for schools to do. Much has been written about the need for fundamental economic, social, and political change in our country in order for educational inequities, like those experienced by WEP students, to be reversed (Anyon, 1997; 2005). Clearly, policies that are favorable to labor unions and working class people, that blunt the devastating impact of de-industrialization and globalization, that favor need-based financial aid for higher education, to name a few, would have dramatic and positive implications for WEP and its students. Yet, given the odds of this happening in the near future, I reaffirm my belief in the possibility of schools to mediate, though imperfectly, social inequality. Not only can schools, such as WEP, stimulate students to become actors in the struggle for social justice, until larger social and economic structures change, I believe education can serve to ameliorate social inequality in important ways which this research attempts to illuminate and reveal.

A Note on Method

When I began my research, I had taught writing at WEP for nearly a decade. As a starting point in many of my classes, students had written personal narratives of their educational experiences. I was always fascinated by what they wrote – the deep trauma of previous schooling tempered only by their faith in education to enlarge their lives. I was also struck by the fact that these inexperienced writers seemed to produce their best – well written, critical, moving – writing in this genre. As the

experts on their own lives, writing the personal highlighted students' strengths as learners and writers, rather than exposed their weaknesses. Over many semesters, I watched personal writing reveal the common structural forces that forge and constrain what students initially perceived as individual experience. The substantial intersections in diverse groups of students' educational experiences illuminated the power of critical writing pedagogy to engage students in locating the personal in a larger cultural, historical, political context.

I used the writing of educational memoirs by research participants as a main form of data collection (complemented by semi-structured individual interviews) because I was interested in blurring the lines between research and pedagogy. I wanted to explore how writing could be "a mode of inquiry, discovery, and analysis" within and outside of the classroom (Richardson, 1998). As a critical educator, I understood that students' personal experiences had to be the starting point from which the broader analysis and critique that critical pedagogy aims for could grow. I knew that writing the personal was one way for students to begin to locate, and critically interrogate, their place in the world, to begin to "re-write the complex narratives that make up one's life" (Giroux, p. 159, 1997). I also knew it was wise to temper some of the "extravagant claims" of critical pedagogy and to pursue a more modest notion of the power of writing the personal to change the writer's vision of her life (Kamler, 2001). This was in line with my desire to conduct research with transformative potential that would encourage "...self-reflection and deeper understanding on the part of the researched at least as much as it...generate[s] empirically grounded theoretical knowledge" (Lather, p. 60, 1991).

In this project, I did not want to simply mine the memoirs for content to further an argument about adult college students (although I certainly will do some of that here). My intent was to value the telling as well as what's told, to see the memoirs as counterstories (Delgado, 1989; Perry et al, 2003) that challenge accepted wisdoms about adult college students and their journeys through schools, stories that engaged the writers in refuting oppressive myths about their own educations. I developed a research process that would respect and balance the two, not always complementary, goals of engaging the participants in a personally emancipatory process as part of a larger project to understand what their college educations mean and what they reveal about how institutions of education can better serve students.

Student Memoir Writers

Through the following short sketches, I introduce readers to those WEP students who wrote their educational memoirs as part of my research². I would have liked to include each participant's full memoir, but the limits of space make that impossible. These snapshots should serve as a reference point for voices the readers will come to know more fully in the chapters that follow³. I hope they, like this dissertation, illuminate the complexities of adult students' journeys to and through higher education and upset common sense notions of why working class adults of color return to school and what their college educations mean to them.

April Chambers' writing reveals deep doubts about her academic past and potential. Her memoir traces her evolution from "bright eyed twelve year old who thought I could do anything" to being a student who just "scraped by" in her prior education in the West Indies. April's memoir reflects on the loss of dedicated teachers – due to budget cuts – during her high school years in her home country and how "the

² All the names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

³ Though all the students who wrote their memoirs are women, I interviewed two men students whose voices also appear in the chapters that follow.

motivational force behind my learning was taken away and never replaced.” She describes these teachers as an “instrument to help bridge the gap to my academic future” given that her own parents, who had little formal education themselves, were not “academically oriented.” April went straight to work upon graduating from high school, married, had children, and entertained no thoughts of college until she migrated to the US and was forced, by her immigration status, to do domestic work. She writes that these “were the most dormant years of my life.” Dissatisfied with her employment options, and with herself, April got her GED. Yet, her “GED continued to collect dust” for several years as she rationalized why starting college was not practical or possible. “Deep down inside,” she writes, “where my honesty hides, I knew I wanted to start college. I just did not have the nerve to start.” April was encouraged and cajoled, then pushed and prodded, first by a friend in WEP, and then by one of the WEP counselors, to apply to the program and take the CUNY entrance exams. Startled to pass two of three exams, she began college with much fear and trepidation. “The armor I wore to hide my fear was a bright smile, and with that in place I started.” College has helped April’s self doubt to dissipate; she is proud of her improved writing skills and the fact that she is persevering in a caring, supportive college environment. In her memoir, April reflects that, “early in my college years, I did not think anyone would want to read about my life. I thought I was just one of millions struggling through life with nothing special to offer.” Her college education, and the memoir project, have helped her to see that, “I am relevant.” Although she is still unclear about what she will do with her degree, April hopes it will be part of attaining more satisfying and stable employment.

Deborah Everett is a deeply religious woman and her educational journey is entwined with her spiritual one. As a board member of her church, she was encouraged by her pastor to pursue her secular education and attend college. As a union member, Deborah was eligible for tuition-free credits in WEP and enrolled. Deborah not only completed her BA, but attained her Masters degree in Urban Studies simultaneous with her retirement from the city hospital where she worked as a civil servant for forty-four years. In her memoir, Deborah recounts her early educational experiences as positive ones, despite “attending a high school under racial stress” during court mandated desegregation. “In spite of the obstacles placed in [her] way” as a black student, Deborah maintained high educational aspirations – to be a nurse and missionary – and graduated from high school with an academic diploma. Her plans to attend college were put on hold for financial reasons and she soon began her career as a civil servant. Deborah married, had a son, and divorced in the ensuing years, while working full-time and pursuing her spiritual vocation. Deborah describes her college education as giving her “a new sense of accomplishment and increased self-esteem” as well as enhanced critical thinking abilities. She credits the knowledge of world affairs she attained in college with helping her cope with her son’s mental health crisis and discharge from the military after his deployment in the Gulf War. Deborah sees her spiritual goals – “to serve community and humanity” – as aligned with WEP’s social justice orientation. She now hopes to spend her retirement as a missionary in Africa.

The first sentences of **Phyllis Fulton's** memoir ground her pursuit of education in her “cultural heritage, religious beliefs, family history, and life experiences.” “My parents are descendants of slaves,” she proclaims, “therefore so am I!” Phyllis’ memoir is a deep and moving exploration of her desire to activate her college education to “to unlock the doors that were once shut to my people” and her sorrowful coming to consciousness that “in as much as many things have changed for my people, many things have remained the same.” Phyllis graduated from high school and although she would have liked to attend college, an early pregnancy and lack of parental support for her to continue in school pushed her into the job market. A couple of years later, she felt lucky to have received a civil service job that offered sufficient pay and benefits to support her family. Although Phyllis was encouraged to attend college by her work supervisor, and enrolled when her children were young, she was forced to abandon her studies when her son’s emotional problems escalated. Phyllis returned to college, at WEP, shortly after her son’s murder by another African American young man. Phyllis views this loss as a personal and collective tragedy in which “limited education and a myopic perception of life” cause young African American men to “not make better decisions for their lives” and thus, “contribute to the genocide of our people.” Phyllis writes that her first semester at WEP was “instrumental” in her grieving process, and helped her to situate her personal loss in the context of other tragic local and world events. Phyllis also returns to college hopeful that her degree will provide her “upward mobility in a professional career.” Her writing explores how nepotism, politics, and racism – rather than qualifications or credentials – govern advancement in the city agency where she is employed which she likens to a contemporary “plantation.” Phyllis’ memoir reveals the parallel processes of disappointment and critical awareness her college education has inspired. Neither her BA nor MA has brought her the mobility she desired, but Phyllis writes “education has provided me with the ability to decipher the lies. I am no longer confused.” Her education at WEP has given her critical insight into the structural forces that limit individual mobility through education. Although she is “full of sorrow,” she is grateful for the awareness education has afforded her.

Brenda Johnson's memoir centers around her pursuit of taking college entrance exams in her home country in the West Indies. Despite her deep desire to pursue an academically rigorous education which would culminate in attending college, Brenda faces many obstacles. Time and again, Brenda is thwarted in her attempts to take exams which are the gateway to college attendance by what she describes as a series of unfortunate, but inevitable events – schools close their doors, she is late to register for an exam, she is born the wrong month. “Fate,” she writes, “wasn’t shining its light in my pathway.” This long travail ends with her finally sitting and passing both the college entrance exam and an interview at a college of art, science and technology located in her country’s capital. But, at the last moment, after years of laboriously plotting her way into college, Brenda abandons her dream and returns to her high school instead where she is employed in a secretarial capacity for the next fifteen years. This decision, she writes, was the result of “procrastination,” fear of being on her own in the city, and the “mountainous hurdle” of finances. Brenda experiences a sense of her own educational inferiority in this job since all of her co-workers have

more education and when she migrates to the US, she “decide[s] to take action.” Although her union local does not provide its members with the most generous tuition assistance, she seeks out WEP and enrolls. In her first semesters, Brenda faces health problems, concerns over finances, and insecurities about her ability to succeed in college, but she has persisted, in part, she writes, due to the encouragement she received from instructors who went out of their way to accommodate her while she went through surgery. Brenda is proud to have been a role model to her son who completed college a couple of years before her projected commencement date. But, higher education has not been easy for Brenda. At times she has felt lonely in and out of class, feeling that “books seemed to be my only companion.” While she remains unsure where the degree will take her, she is very certain that she has “fulfilled the most outstanding desire of my entire life.”

It took 14 years from the time **Carmen Martinez** finished high school to set foot inside a college classroom despite her self-described “hunger” for learning. Unlike most adult students, she writes that her reasons for entering college were “not linked to my career aspirations or to improving my financial potential,” although those benefits occurred to her once she’d begun. Carmen simply craved the “exhilaration” of learning and the interaction of a classroom setting. An academically successful student in high school, as a young, working class Latina, Carmen was counseled away from college and into the world of work. The single mother of three young daughters, Carmen considered college for many years before finally enrolling. Encouraged by a promotional flyer for WEP distributed at her worksite, Carmen’s intense desire for intellectual stimulation overcame her fears that she would not succeed. It took Carmen ten long, satisfying, exhausting, and exciting years to get her college degree. For Carmen, WEP was a place where she “discovered a better me... the classroom is a place where I am Carmen; I am not mommy, honey or an employee.” Her memoir describes an educational experience in which she gained the confidence to speak out in classes where she originally experienced anxiety so intense “that my heart would be pounding so loudly that the bum-bi-de-bump resounding in my ears would almost drown out the words.” Carmen writes that her college education challenged her to reverse cultural mores around marriage and education, teaching her daughters to say *when*, not *if*, they go to college and *if*, not *when*, they marry and have kids. In labor studies classes, Carmen was exposed to “more critical views of reality” which initially “enraged and appalled” her, yet led to her developing a deep sense of class consciousness and an understanding of the labor movement as a “vehicle for positive social change.” Carmen ends her memoir on the cusp of her college graduation. Although she is not yet sure how she will live out her commitment to working class issues and consciousness, one thing is very clear: her “appetite for learning may take a lifetime to satiate.”

Rosa Santana’s narrative begins with a beautiful description of what life in the Puerto Rican countryside was like for her as a child prior to emigrating to New York City at the age of seven. She remembers the “narrow dirt road dotted with wooden houses on stilts...the lush trees everywhere with mangoes hanging low on tired branches...the creek [that] divided the town from the country.” Moving to NYC

brought “running water, toilets, two bedrooms” and public school in English. Rosa was a quiet student and got good grades despite the fact that in her family, “there was no encouragement to excel...no specific goals to attain, A’s, B’s, C’s as long as you passed.” She recalls being ashamed to bring her parents, who had little formal education themselves, to school on Open School night because they did not speak English. “School,” she writes, “was my exclusive world.” Rosa never contemplates attending college after high school largely because she “knew the cost would be prohibitive.” She felt important working in an office, as opposed to in a garment factory like her mother had, and she writes, “in the eyes of our immigrant friends we were succeeding.” Though it is twenty years later when Rosa first begins college, her re-entry into the world of education is again a claim for a place of her own. Rosa writes that, “what started as a respite from four children and a husband turned into a serious endeavor.” Rosa found that she enjoyed learning, that writing came easy, and her speaking voice came alive. She received an AA degree and upon graduation returned to the world of work, this time as a civil servant. Another twenty years passed before Rosa was “enticed” to return to college by the tuition free credits offered through WEP. Rosa describes having “another intellectual growth spurt” during her tenure at WEP. She writes, “I became more aware of the need for community activism, the fact that we must not remain complacent for there is still much work to be done.” Rosa’s memoir ends upon her retirement from civil service, as she grapples with the difficulty of enacting the kind of activism and community service she sees her college education as instilling in her. She muses about “how to carry this thinking beyond graduation” and struggles with her sense of guilt and frustration that she knows “what is wrong, the reasons why, but I am not involved in changing things.”

Sandra Victor’s memoir describes the impact of racially segregated education from her early childhood in Florida where she attended all black schools, to a failing high school in NYC, to her first college experience directly out of high school. “I had always attended predominantly black schools before. The only white people I encountered were my teachers, shoppers or TV characters... sometimes I felt like a fish out of water like when I would be the only black student in [college] class. Feeling like an outcast was a heavy burden to carry.” Racism, she now names, led to her dropping out of college. After having a child, Sandra made a couple of other unsuccessful attempts at returning to college until she got a civil service job. “Hard to advance, easy to stay” is how Sandra describes her years in a secretarial job at a New York City agency. It wasn’t until her son became college age and Sandra discovered that he did not want to pursue higher education that she enrolled in WEP. After years of feeling like “I was the dropout with the kid,” Sandra intended to be a role model for her son. Eight years later, she has completed both her BA and her MA degrees, although her son still hasn’t finished college. What attracted Sandra to WEP was the generous tuition assistance her union provided (in her words, “free was free”) and her hopes the education would lead to further advancement on her job. Sandra immediately felt comfortable in a program where being a “second chance” student was the norm. The respectful, caring environment and the “life changing” urban studies curriculum gave Sandra the confidence to finish her BA and pursue a Masters

degree. Sandra's memoir describes "a very special education" that intersected with her work and life experience to prepare and motivate her to become a tenant leader and community organizer on housing issues. While she feels a sense of satisfaction from the work she does in administering housing programs for low income people, her job title and pay lag way behind the actual work she performs. Sandra's education has helped her to be sure that it is "racism and politics" not lack of credentials that have kept her from advancing. Sandra left WEP searching for the most effective way to put her skills, knowledge, and social change commitments to work to help her community.

Florence White's writing begins with a description of the limited educational and employment opportunities available to her parents as working class African Americans. At the same time, she firmly establishes her family's deep belief in the power of education. "Obtaining knowledge," she writes, "was a gene I'd inherited from my parents." Florence's own educational experiences were also indelibly marked by race. Dissatisfied with the under-resourced neighborhood school her children were slated to attend, Florence's mother had her children bused to a newly desegregating school in a predominantly white neighborhood in New York City in the 1960's. Although the school had more qualified teachers and better resources, Florence writes, "all my days at my new school were not good. I met discrimination and other people's prejudices for the first time." Florence's academic success and her motivation to excel in school are blunted when she scored high enough to receive a scholarship to a private school and it is awarded to a white boy instead. "My mother was ready to fight to get me accepted," she writes, but Florence recalled the prejudice she'd already experienced in this school and feared the negative consequences of being "singled out." After this experience, she writes, "my education continued and I worked hard, but not as hard as I could." Unlike her siblings, Florence graduated from high school and received an academic diploma and went on to attend college, but her tenure in higher education was cut short when she was called from the civil service list for a job working for the city of New York. Florence attempted to return to college twelve years and two children later only to have her efforts stymied by a succession of family illnesses and deaths. Twenty-six years after she first began college, when her daughter graduated with a Bachelor's degree, Florence decided it was time for her to complete her education. With thoughts of job promotions on her mind, she finally attended an open house for WEP and enrolled. Attending college at this point in her life has not been easy for Florence. She finds the demands of college challenging and feels guilty neglecting her family responsibilities. But, she is close to achieving what her deceased parents were denied and wanted so badly for their children – a college education.

Ivy Wong's memoir was written over the two years she was a student at WEP. The first installment, written in an education class during her first semester at WEP, is steeped in the shame of her previous educational failure. She describes her sense of being racially and socially isolated at an academically competitive Catholic high school that privileged individual achievement at the expense of "collective prosperity." She recalls the deep humiliation she felt at "flunking out" of three

colleges and her Chinese immigrant parents' inability to effectively support or guide her through this painful process. Ivy's start in WEP is tentative, but hopeful. "I finally found a place where I feel comfortable," she writes. "I understand the students here and I am also understood." She reflects on the non-traditional pedagogy and urban studies curriculum noting, "people here, unfortunately, know exactly of the dire consequences of a failing school system, a disappearing welfare program, and the loss of jobs in an urban area..." Although Ivy is, at first, reluctant to join in the passionate class discussion which she says at times "resembled a talk show format," she describes how reading Paulo Freire in a WE course helped her to understand the pedagogy she was experiencing and to "give voice to my beliefs." When Ivy finished writing in her last semester in WEP, she had moved on from processing past educational trauma; the pace, detail and lively voice of her writing have also changed. School is now a site of hope and faith in her ability to steer her own life. Ivy's next installment of her memoir consists of a rich and detailed description of her education at WEP, and a community organizing class that crystallized many of her ideas about education and society. Ivy writes, "this course greatly assisted me in finding direction in my life... This may sound facile, but it is incredibly reassuring to discover that others feel the same way I do, that my own instincts are correct." Through this course and her activist instructors, Ivy attends her first anti-war rally, becomes passionate about the abuse of domestic workers, and considers activism or teaching as a possible career. Ivy ends her memoir just before her imminent and much awaited graduation from college. She contemplates leaving the safe and secure job she hates in an accounting firm and grapples with what will come next. She reflects on and discards career options others propose for her and articulates her new found faith in herself to make this crucial life decision. She ends this section of her memoir with these queries and her answers, "Should I trust my own instincts? What do you think, class, should I take the leap and try teaching? On second thought, thanks for the advice, but I will figure this out. I know I will make the right decision." Ivy reflects that her education at WEP, an education centered on "taking part rather than just listening to lectures and note-taking," has prepared her for whatever will come next.

Engaging Conversations

I began this research with a set of open-ended research questions intent on learning more about what motivated students to begin, and enabled them to persist, in higher education at WEP. Because I did not set out with a specific hypothesis to prove, my findings, and the scholarly conversations I engage, are multiple and varied. I attempt to weave a coherent web of these interrelated dialogues in the chapters that follow using the students' educational experiences as the unifying force. The theories

and research I consider, question, build from, and complicate spring from a breadth of traditions in educational scholarship, several of which I describe below.

My research builds upon the work of many scholars who challenge the myth of higher education as the primary vehicle for class mobility in our society, particularly for working class students of color (Aronowitz, 2000; Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Fine & Burns, 2003; Lafer, 2002; Nasaw, 1979; Zweig, 2000). My findings echo the claims of these scholars and expose specific dilemmas of mobility for students at WEP. From a fine-grained analysis of WEP students' mobility desires, I build upon existing scholarship (Gilkes, 1983; Higginbotham & Weber, 1992) to theorize a notion of collective upward mobility that links individual aspirations to the progress of students' families and the uplift of their racial and ethnic communities. I argue that this collective conception of upward mobility is possible, in part, due to the broad and critical college education students receive at WEP.

My research also builds upon and challenges the vast scholarship on minority students' academic achievement (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1974; 2003). Contrary to conventional theories of minority (under)achievement, my research participants' educational biographies depict them as students with high academic aspirations and a deep commitment to their educational success. Despite harsh experiences in schools, that often temporarily derailed their academic aspirations, for many of my research participants academic achievement has become a vehicle through which they exert their human agency. I theorize that their return to school and commitment to academic achievement is a subtle form of

positive resistance (O'Connor, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999) to oppressive structural forces.

My research further explores the ways in which WEP supports these particular students to produce successful college outcomes and considers the impact of school level reforms to mediate educational inequity for non-traditional college students. Specifically, I consider the role of care in schools (Eaker-Rich & Van Galen, 1996; Noddings, 1984; 1992; Prillaman, 1994; Wasley et al, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999) and advocate a theory and practice of critical care (Rolon-Dow, 2005; Van Galen, 1993; Walker, 1996; Walker & Snarey, 2004; Webb et al, 1993) that recognizes the significance of structural factors, such as race and class, on outcomes in schooling. My findings locate educational equity as an essential component of care in schools and lead me to elaborate a theory and practice of education that fuses care to high expectations and academic rigor in order to ensure equitable educational outcomes for non-traditional college students.

Finally, my research draws upon the extensive literature on critical pedagogy (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Freire, 1970; Darder et al, 2003; Giroux, 2001; Leistyna et al, 1996) and situates WEP as an exemplar of education for social change. I explore the nexus of theory and practice on critical pedagogy through the prism of one educational site. My findings both underscore the importance of small educational spaces that go against the grain and highlight the profound challenges to enacting critical pedagogical theory in the current U.S. context. My research aims to invigorate theories of education for transformation through close examination of critical

pedagogical practice in the context of one union-supported worker education program.

Organization

I outline the remaining chapters of this dissertation below.

Chapter 2 describes the research design and approach to data analysis I employed in this study.

Chapter 3 explores the **mobility dilemmas and desires** of adult college students at WEP and, in considering their lack of career advancement, theorizes alternate explanations for their persistence in school. While many students enter WEP with typical desires for individual mobility, often their desires for career advancement are tightly bound to their aspirations for their family, community, and ethnic/racial group. Mobility desires, while real and acutely felt, represented only the first layer in a complex web of motivations that led my research participants to attend, and remain in, college as adults.

Chapter 4 examines the roots of students' **academic motivation** and explores the ways in which students' racial identities can be a deep source of academic motivation despite the negative effects of exclusionary acts based on class and race which acted to diminish students' high academic aspirations as youth. This chapter also explores the complex role of family in promoting and deterring academic achievement in adult college students and concludes with an exploration of academic achievement as a subtle form of resistance for these students as working class women and men of color.

In both chapters 5 and 6, I examine the complex relationship between care and academic rigor. I explore the ways in which care is central to adult students' academic success and implicated in challenges to achieving rigorous academic standards for under-prepared college students. **Chapter 5** explores the positive side of **care at WEP** and looks specifically at how intentional program structures, curricular and pedagogical choices, and staff and faculty commitment to respect and compassion for adult worker students combine to keep WEP students moving towards degree completion. In this chapter, I theorize a notion of critical care that explicitly links high academic expectations and rigor to equity in educational outcomes.

Chapter 6 portrays the dilemmas of **academic rigor at WEP** in all their complexity. It explores the role of race, class, and gender in determining academic expectations and outcomes and highlights the crucial role of institutional constraints, including allocation of resources, to implementing rigorous education for academically under-prepared students. I consider rigor as a question of educational equity and social justice and argue for fusing care and rigor in pursuit of the best possible college education for adult worker students.

In **Chapter 7**, I consider both the **possibilities and limits of enacting education for social change** at WEP, extracting lessons to be learned from this program as it attempts to live out its commitment to equal access and outcomes in higher education and simultaneously practice education for social change. I explore both faculty and student perspectives on the complexity of teaching for critical consciousness and the challenges of moving from learning to enacting social change. I consider the importance of liberal arts education for working class students and

argue that keeping the theme of education for social change alive is significant, though not sufficient, in these conservative times.

Chapter 8 concludes the dissertation with **reflections on the research journey** and an exploration of the **role of personal narrative writing** in qualitative research. I consider the evolution of my research questions and process and examine the impact writing their educational memoirs had on research participants' understanding of their educational journeys.

Chapter 2

Research Methods

“Writing is also a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis” (Richardson, p. 345, 1998).

I asked students to bring an educational artifact – an object they’d saved, something they’d written, a photograph, anything that represented or revealed something important about their educational experiences – to the first educational memoir class session or their interview. William brought a photo of himself with Amiri Baraka, a reminder of the importance writing played in his college experience. Carmen brought a paper she’d written in her first semester at the WEP, aware of the distance she had traveled as a writer since those early drafts were produced. April brought an essay she wrote that was published in the WEP literary ‘zine, overwhelmed to have a piece of her own creation published for all to read. Deborah brought the start of her educational memoir, a symbol of her journey, still incomplete, through the worlds of school and learning. I am surprised, and pleased, that so many of the artifacts are pieces of the students own writing. (Field note, 3/12/04)

Researcher Stance

My experiences as a teacher of writing at WEP shaped both my methods and the questions that guided my dissertation research. As a veteran writing teacher, I chose a research design with a deep pedagogical bent that played off my strengths as an educator. I sought to engage my participants in an “emancipatory” research paradigm and hoped that the writing of educational memoirs would have transformative potential for the participants, the findings “catalytic validity” for the research site (Lather, 1991). Having read reams of students’ personal narratives over many years as a teacher, I also sensed that using writing *by research participants* would produce the kind of rich and nuanced data I would need to best answer the questions that drove my research.

The methodological currents that underpin my research design are rich and varied. I intentionally blur the borders between critical writing pedagogy (Kamler,

2001) and narrative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Josselson, et al 2003; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992) and explore the ways in which the two complement and enhance one another. Rather than forming hypotheses to be proven or disproven, my research framed questions for exploration as I studied the lives, experiences, and understandings of students at WEP through their written, and oral, educational history narratives. The use of narratives, particularly written memoirs, placed student experience at the center of the inquiry underscoring my belief that "...narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, p. 18, 2000).

But, my research also draws upon other methodological traditions. Like critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Freire, 1987), my research aimed to link reflection to transformative social action. I aimed to conduct research that "re-orient, focuses and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it" (Lather, p. 68, 1991). My goal was not just to reveal— but also to imagine possibilities, and engage in action with a social justice agenda (Weis & Fine, 2004). These goals are in line with participatory action research as well (Brydon-Miller, 1997; Fals-Borda & Rahmann, 1991; Fine et al, 2003; MacGuire, 1987; Park, et al, 1993), from which I borrow a commitment to rooting my inquiry in a local problem, ever mindful of the macro-level implications of my findings.

While I stop short of true participatory research, the use of written narratives by research participants was a means to enact the notion of narrative research as a collaboration between researcher and researched (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and a way of conducting research that was a "reciprocally educative encounter" between

me and the research participants (Lather, p. 72, 1991). I also hoped that my research design could contribute something new to the burgeoning field of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Josselson, et al, 2002; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992; Ouellette, 2003; Richardson, 1998) by placing writing by research participants at the center of my methodological approach.

Research Questions

From the outset, the goals of my research were two-fold: I aimed to simultaneously expand the borders of using writing as research method and to uncover the answers to my questions about the students' educational trajectories and their experiences within the worker education program.

I focused my research around the following questions:

1/ What are the educational biographies of the adult women graduating from WEP?

What is the cumulative impact of their educational histories on their current educational experiences? How do WEP students understand their college educations and how do they situate this experience in their life-long educational journeys?

2/ To what extent, within the larger political economy of higher education, do small social justice programs, like WEP make a difference and to what extent are they under siege? How, specifically, does WEP work to support students' academic success in light of their previous educational experiences?

3/ What does it mean to use the writing of memoir by research participants as pedagogy and research method?

Behind these specific questions was my desire to get inside students' experience of college at WEP, to see how students' educational biographies relate to program

intentions, and to explore the ways in which WEP fits within the larger constellation of structures that impact higher education today.

Research Overview

Research Question	Method(s)	Sample
1/ What are the educational biographies of working class students of color enrolled in the Worker Education B.A. program? What is the cumulative impact of their educational histories on their current educational experiences?	1/ Educational Memoirs 2/ Semi-structured individual interviews	1/ 9 students – 4 drafts each 2/ 14 students
2/ To what extent, within the larger political economy of urban public higher education, do small social justice programs make a difference and to what extent are they under siege?	1/ Educational Memoirs 2/ Semi-structured interviews 3/ Archival sources	1/ 9 students – 4 drafts 2/ 14 students 5 staff 6 faculty 3/ Quantitative program data
3/ What does it mean to use writing as pedagogy and research method?	1/ Educational Memoirs 2/ Semi-structured interviews	1/ 9 students – 4 drafts 2/ 14 students

Research Design

Site Selection

I chose to conduct my research at WEP for several reasons. As a union-supported college degree program for working adults at an urban public university, WEP is a unique program in its commitment to educational access and equity for working adult students. Yet, the challenges WEP students face mirror those confronting the many non-traditional college students enrolled at urban colleges

throughout the United States. By locating my research at this one “site of possibility” I could explore the ways in which one particular program mediated, or not, trends that are prevalent throughout institutions of higher education today. WEP was uniquely positioned to allow me to explore the nested questions of individual student experience and the potentials and limits of a small social justice oriented program while revealing broader implications for higher education policy and practice.

My ten year history as an instructor at WEP provided me invaluable insider knowledge and access to the research site as well. The program administration provided full access and support in designing and leading the educational memoir course (for which the program director served as instructor of record) and use of the site to conduct interviews with students, faculty, and staff. The program administration saw my research as valuable to the program and freely shared internal reports, data, and documents with me. I was able to secure the participation of students, who self-selected for participation, as a well known instructor, with whom many had previously studied. Many of the staff and instructors who participated in my research knew me as a colleague and used our interviews to reflect deeply on their work.

Although my research does not involve conventional ethnographic research, my almost ten years as a participant in my research site, my role as the instructor of the memoir course, my prior connection to my interviewees, provided me with a depth of knowledge about the research site that is commonly associated with ethnographic methods. While I was careful to prevent my previous conceptions of the program from overriding the data (which both substantiated and challenged my prior

understanding of the program in significant ways), I believe that my insider status aided me in moving beyond the micro level to link the multiple layers in an analysis that examines the “societal significance” of my findings (Burawoy, 1991; 2000).

Of course, there are also downsides to being an insider. For me, these involved having to let go of some of my hopes and aspirations for the program’s potential and face the (often less lofty) reality of its current situation instead. It meant being careful not to let my own personal vision and experience substitute for those of my participants. As I struggled to “make the familiar strange” (Spindler & Spindler, 1982), I also had to allow the strange to become familiar, embracing my participants’ narrations of their experiences even when they were very different from my own.

Participant Selection

Since participation in my research was voluntary, I sent a letter to all eligible WEP students and graduates (from the classes of 2001 – 2003) inviting them to participate⁴. Flyers describing the project and selection criteria were placed in all student and faculty mailboxes and the project was announced in classes by cooperating faculty. Student self-selection, based solely upon their willingness to participate, was the determining factor in participant selection. Fifteen students elected to participate in the educational memoir writing course and five others volunteered to participate in individual interviews⁵.

⁴ Because part of what I was interested in capturing in my research was the impact this particular program had on students, I narrowed my pool of potential research participants to students who had studied in the program for a minimum of six semesters.

⁵ Although fifteen students enrolled in the educational memoir writing course, only nine were eligible or elected to participate in my research. Because the course was listed and conducted as a credit-bearing course, I could not restrict entry only to those students who fit my research criteria.

The students who chose to write their memoirs were all women. The youngest was in her mid-30's when she wrote her memoir, the oldest in her late 60's, with the majority in their mid-40's. With one exception, all were mothers. They worked as civil servants in a variety of city agencies with the exception of two who have retired from such jobs. Four of the memoirists were African American, two were from the West Indies, two were Latina, and one was Asian American. Three of the memoir writers received both their BA's and MA's from WEP; six were either enrolled in or had graduated from WEP's undergraduate program. All wrote four drafts of their educational memoirs; the shortest final draft was 13 typed pages, the longest was 28 pages.

I conducted individual semi-structured interviews (Bogden & Biklen, 2003) with five WEP graduates, three women and two men, in addition to all of the memoir writers. The youngest of the interviewees was in her mid-30's and the oldest in her mid-50's; three were in their 40's. All worked as civil servants for a variety of city agencies, and all but one were parents. Two received both their BA's and MA's from WEP, while three had graduated from the undergraduate program. The shortest interview lasted forty-five minutes and the longest one and one-half hours. All were tape recorded.

In a process of consultation with the program director, I determined which faculty constituted the core instructors in the program.⁶ Interestingly, there was an almost exact overlap between the core faculty and those staff and instructors most frequently referenced by students in their memoirs and interviews. These staff and

⁶ There are no instructors – adjunct or tenured – who teach full-time in the QCEC program. Therefore, I considered an instructor part of the “core” faculty if s/he taught in the program for three or more consecutive semesters.

core faculty were invited to participate in individual semi-structured interviews as part of my research during the fall 2004 semester via email and phone. All but one of the instructors contacted agreed to participate. I interviewed five WEP staff people and six WEP instructors. Of the eleven, two were Black and one was Asian, the rest were white. Five were women and six were men. The staff all worked full-time in the program while only two of the faculty were full-time professors at the college.

Data Analysis

Since I situate the educational biographies of my students and WEP as an educational site within the larger political economy of urban public higher education, my data analysis process linked the micro experiences of students to the macro political economic issues that structure their educational histories and trajectories (Burawoy, 1991; 2000). As I analyzed my data, I “oscillated” between the individual lives written in memoirs, to the program context, to the political economy of higher education always seeking the macro implications of lived experience (Weis & Fine, 2004). This data analysis approach matches my research intentions: to set individual experience in a collective and systemic context through a research method that draws out commonalities in individual experience.

Although the educational memoirs represent the heart of my research, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with students, faculty, and staff and analyzed program documents (syllabi, internal reports, promotional materials) in order to triangulate my data and enlarge my unit of analysis beyond the nine memoir writers to the educational site as well. These multiple data sources allowed me a multi-tiered analysis that moves from the micro level of the student memoirs through WEP and

out to the broader universe of higher education, considering the structural implications of local phenomena.

I did not begin this research with a set of theoretical assumptions to prove or disprove, although certainly theory swirled in my head at every step of the way – in each interview, in every draft of the memoirs, in the way I read and interpreted the data. Using “dialectical theory building” (Lather, p. 267, 1986) I engaged data and theory in a reciprocal relationship to generate coding categories and data interpretation. Questions of academic rigor at WEP, for example, emerged in the data, although this was not a theoretical construct I set out to explore a priori. Yet, once rigor emerged as a substantive issue in the data, I followed it, theorized it, read about it, and time and time again, went back to the data. My interpretations grew out of this on-going dialogue between the data and existing theory.

Finally, given the nature of the data I collected, most notably the memoirs, my data analysis approach heeds Weis and Fine’s (2000) reminder of the value of theory to interrupt hegemonic narratives. As I analyzed the memoirs, I simply could not accept at face value those participants who shoulder full responsibility for their educational failures without theorizing the role structural forces greater than themselves played. While I hoped the critical writing pedagogy would move students from self-blame to a more critical narration of their educational experiences, in my analysis I made sure to “refrain from the naïve belief that these voices should stand on their own or that voices should (or do) survive without theorizing” (p. 53).

Process

My data analysis process involved reading each draft of every educational memoir as they were handed in and providing each student a type-written response to each draft (which became part of my data set). I generated a preliminary list of codes across memoirs as I read them and typed research notes about these themes. I engaged the research participants in my preliminary data analysis by asking them to reflect upon the common themes and divergences they saw in the memoirs after every writing group session. I recorded their responses and integrated them into my growing list of codes.

I took field notes during each meeting of the educational memoir course and reflected in writing upon the course sessions immediately after each one. I wrote alongside my students whenever possible and appropriate, drafting my own educational memoir as the research participants wrote theirs. Excerpts from my memoir are found in chapter 8.

After all drafts of the memoirs were submitted, I analyzed them in several ways. I once again looked across the final drafts of each memoir coding for common themes as well as disconfirming elements. I also analyzed within/through each memoir writer's many drafts and my written responses to each draft looking not only for the evolution, or erasure, of themes but also to see what happened when research participants were asked to write, share and revise their memoirs over the course of a semester. As the memoirs are the source of data that answer both my methodological and content research questions, I analyzed the evolution of the whole memoir when exploring answers to these methodological questions.

I tape recorded and transcribed all the interviews. I coded the transcripts of each interview after I transcribed it. I wrote about the questions, conundrums, conflicts I saw arising in the data after each transcription was done in dated, thematically organized research notes. From these notes, I generated a list of codes for students and another for faculty/staff that I added to after each transcription. I developed these lists into two charts – one for students and one for faculty/staff – in order to be able to cross reference each code within each interview. I also was then able to cross reference the codes generated in staff-faculty interviews with those generated in student interviews to find points of overlap and divergence. These charts enabled me to quantify how often a code emerged as well as to note in which participants' interviews.

I analyzed the interviews individually as well as in sets, exploring differences and commonalities in the themes that arose among the memoir writers and those students who did not participate in the memoir writing process. Faculty/staff interviews were analyzed individually and in groups, staff vs. faculty, adjunct vs. full-time faculty, coding once again for inter-group as well as intra-group commonalities and contradictions. I triangulated my data – memoirs, individual interviews with students and faculty, archival sources – in order to seek out the most relevant and significant of the findings. I chose to interview faculty and staff to see if the students' sense of their college experience jibed with theirs and to enlarge my unit of analysis to WEP. These interviews represent an important source of sobriety and perspective (triangulation) on the necessarily subjective interpretation of lived experience students offered.

Impact of Research on Participants and Program

Many of the memoir writers have expressed a deep sense of gratitude for the opportunity to write about their lives and to reflect deeply on their educational journeys. My research was also an opportunity for instructors – who are typically isolated and overwhelmed – to reflect deeply on their students, the program, their teaching. Almost all said that the interview was an all too rare opportunity to reflect on their tenure at the WEP and many thanked me for the chance to step back and ponder the meaning of their work. I have had many hours of conversations with members of the staff about my preliminary findings, reflections, insights which they have found useful in their work as they go about the day to day business of teaching and administering a program with a skeletal staff. I have also participated in union-sponsored meetings with students and staff to reflect on program curricula and directions and my research has given me new insight to share in these settings.

There have been other offshoots of my research as well. Several of the student research participants participated in an academic conference presentation on their journeys through higher education which led to a presentation on the college transition for high school seniors at a NYC public high school. Another of the research participants did a presentation in an urban education course I taught. Although I initially formed a research advisory group, it is now defunct due to the length of time it has taken me to collect and analyze my data and finish writing. I hope to resurrect this group of participants to guide me in the presentation of what are, essentially, their stories, as I near public presentation of this work.

Yet, despite my commitment to do research that “gives back,” I did not always accomplish as much as I would have liked. Changes in the WEP administration, in particular, limited the catalytic potential I’d hoped this research would have for internal program change. Since I completed my data collection, the program has changed its institutional affiliation, has hired a new director, and is considering admitting traditional-aged students. It is unclear whether the program described within these pages remains a viable entity. These constraints (which I will further explore in Chapter 7) take on heightened relevance given the program’s uncertain future and underscore the difficulties inherent in attempting action-oriented research for a dissertation (MacGuire, 1987).

Who I Am – How I Write This

Although participation in my research was completely voluntary, one can never entirely erase the dynamics of power and authority present in any student-teacher relationship, even among adults. In addition to those inequalities, there also existed race and class differences between myself and my research participants which rose up painfully for me, at times, when reading their memoirs and seeing myself in the white, often Jewish, teachers whose racism had indelibly marred their lives in schools. Yet, my data reveal that writing on the part of research participants may be an important tool for white researchers committed to carrying out social justice research – of which race and racism are an integral part – in communities of color. Locating race and racism as central aspects of their educational experiences seemed to come easier to my research participants in the written memoirs than in our face to face encounters. Thus, using written narratives by research participants served as a

way to bridge, to whatever extent is possible, the race/class divisions that separated me from my research participants.

It is always complex, challenging, and full of contradictions to be a white researcher writing about people of color. I hope not to replicate the damage much traditional research has caused communities of color, nor appropriate the students' stories for my own advancement. Instead I aspire for my work to, as Anzaldua (1990) writes, "help heal breaches of knowledge" (p. xxi) about adult college students. Yet, for purposes of readability, I have chosen to introduce the memoir writers in my own words, and some of their own, so that readers can get to know them and, hopefully, follow the thread of their stories through the many chapters of this dissertation.

Although I quote at length throughout the dissertation, I am aware that this method of presentation runs the serious risk of re-writing their stories in such a way that they are no longer the students own. I am wary of the danger of writing (to borrow from Lisa Delpit) "other people's lives," wary that the "snippets" of memoir I have "selected, pruned, and spruced up" for their presentation here serve my purposes and intentions in producing a coherent argument about the memoirs rather than what each writer intended (Richardson, p. 353, 1998). Of course an entirely different story could be told about them. As Kamler (2001) suggests, "Stories do not tell single truths, but rather represent a truth, a perspective, a particular way of seeing experience and naming it" (p. 46). It is precisely this malleability, stories' openness to re-envisioning, this partiality of stories that is key to their transformative potential. It is also one of their limitations.

Yet, as Conley (2000) argues, “memoir has its compensating virtues” (p. 229). The WEP students’ memoirs provided rich and nuanced data on the educational struggles of adult college students, delving deeper than their oral narratives into the many factors that inspired and thwarted their achievement in schools. I would have uncovered quite different findings – thinner ones I believe – had I not chosen to use personal narrative writing as the centerpiece of my research. While several participants expressed a sense that their interviews with me were cathartic and useful, others became notably nervous, flustered, and shy when the tape recorder went on. Composing in the privacy of their homes or workplaces, with just the computer screen between them and their inner thoughts, seemed to allow their stories to flow in greater detail and honesty. As Behar (1996) asserts, “New stories are rushing to be told in languages we’ve never used before, stories that tell truths we once hid, truths we didn’t dare acknowledge, truths that shamed us” (p. 33). The WEP students’ memoirs form part of this avalanche of stories revealing new truths about those who’d previously been silent. Although questions of generalizability emerge when using research methods that center on individual life experience, it is my hope and belief – in both the students’ memoirs and my own writing of this dissertation – that “a personal voice, if creatively used, can lead the reader, not into miniature bubbles of navel gazing, but into the enormous sea of social issues” (Behar, p. 14, 1996).

Chapter 3

“My degree only meant I had persevered”

Class, Race, Higher Education, and Mobility

“Society has acclimated [the students] to believe in, or propagandized them into believing, yes, higher education means higher earning potential, that’s the constant propaganda. So, when they don’t see that, it’s very hard.” (WEP staff member)

“I got the undergraduate degree because I really thought the only way you are going to move up, I really wanted to believe that it is imperative that you have credentials because that is what everyone said...” (Phyllis, WEP student)

For over half a century, a college education has been seen as the conduit to white collar employment in this country (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Nasaw, 1979). Yet, the expansion of higher education access and degree attainment – first through the GI Bill and then in the 1960’s as more working class and people of color entered higher education – has created greater expectations for upward mobility than the job market can bear (Anyon, 2005; Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Lafer, 2002; Nasaw, 1979). As early as 1960, Clark noted the “inconsistency between encouragement to achieve and the realities of limited opportunity” for social mobility via higher education attainment (p. 569). In the last decades, institutions of higher education have consistently produced a greater supply of college graduates than available middle class jobs. Although it is widely believed that a college education is a necessary employment credential, Anyon (2005) argues that “most job openings in the next ten years will not require either sophisticated skills or a college degree” (p. 20). In fact, U.S. Department of Labor projections are that only 12.6% of new jobs will require a bachelor’s degree (cited in Anyon, p. 20, 2005). Thus, the number of

college graduates has outpaced the jobs requiring college level skills and many college graduates, like so many WEP alumni, end up performing work for which only a high school education is necessary. Increasing numbers of college graduates not only work beneath their educational qualifications, but many – 11% in 1990 – of those with a bachelor’s degree earned close to the minimum wage (Levin-Waldman, p. 18, 1999 cited in Anyon). Hence, the contradiction of unfulfilled expectations, so painfully experienced by many WEP graduates, is a more widespread phenomenon than popularly believed (Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Clark, 1960).

Although more education does generally translate into higher income in the United States, “race, ethnicity, and gender mediate the degree to which increased education enhances earnings” (Fine & Burns, p. 843, 2003). According to the 2000 US Census Bureau Current Population Survey, while white men with a bachelor’s degree had a median income of \$53,557, the median income for Black women with Bachelor’s degrees was only \$35,634. Hispanic women had a median income of \$32,469 – more than \$20,000 *less* than their white male counterparts with equal educational credentials. Lafer (2002) notes that the effects of race discrimination often offset education with minority workers at every level of education losing ground to similarly prepared Whites (p. 84). Although the ideology that higher education leads to upward mobility undergirds its expansion, the real outcomes for graduates – particularly women and people of color – often refute this belief. Fine and Burns (2004) conclude that, “Education matters enormously *within* groups, but less so *across*” (p. 844). Racism and sexism substantially mitigate the equalizing effects of higher education attainment among women and people of color. Nevertheless,

educational levels in the United States continue to rise despite these disheartening outcomes for minority and female college graduates. WEP students are no exception in accepting the “ideology of the American dream [that] keeps most seduced and encouraged despite widespread evidence to the contrary divert[ing] attention away from structural designs that systematically block poor people, and people of color, in the aggregate, from realizing material access to that dream” (Fine & Burns, p. 844, 2003).

Despite the widespread belief in education as a vehicle for upward mobility, occupational achievement is still most powerfully determined by class origin (Aronowitz; 2003; Walkerdine et al, 2001; Zweig, 2000). According to Aronowitz (2003), fewer than one-third of Americans move beyond their class origins. The majority of working class people experience only “short distance mobility” through education – a move from poverty into the working class or from unskilled into skilled labor via vocationally oriented higher education (Adair & Dahlberg, 2003; Zweig, 2000). Contrary to popular wisdom, institutions of higher education are well documented vehicles for reproducing social class stratification in our society – as a mechanism to preserve the domains of the elite and maintain social class distinctions (Aronowitz, 2003). As such, the discrepancy in earning power for bachelor’s degree holders is also substantially influenced by the status of the institution awarding the degree (Aronowitz, 2000). Given that more working class and students of color graduate from community colleges and other public, non-competitive institutions, the market value of their degrees is less (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Thus, higher education for working class students often becomes a vehicle for class maintenance –

preventing a downward slide into poverty – rather than a means of mobility (Aronowitz, 2000; Zweig, 2000).

Defining Class

The union to which the majority of WEP students belong, Communication Workers of America (CWA) local 1180, represents civil service workers employed in a variety of job titles by New York City agencies such as the Department of Health or the Human Resources Administration. Many of the WEP students who are 1180 members are employed as secretarial and administrative workers, most under the broad job title of Principal Administrative Associate. PAA's, as they are known in the shorthand of city bureaucracies, range across three levels of pay and job responsibilities. In July 2004, PAA's could earn between \$33,222 and \$62,842 per year and could perform a range of job duties from secretarial to supervisory. This salary span is average for 1180 members, with only the highest level computer technicians earning up to \$79,000 per year and clerical workers earning starting salaries in the mid \$20,000 range. Promotion from one level to the next, for PAA's and other multi-level job titles, is entirely at the discretion of management, as are newly instituted merit increases (CWA Local 1180 Collective Bargaining Agreement). Promotion from one job title to another depends upon the successful passing of civil service examinations and the availability of jobs in a given agency (Henning, personal interview).

The union to which the second largest group of WEP students belongs is Local 1549 of District Council 37, AFSCME. Local 1549 represents civil service clerical workers, secretaries, administrative aides, and technicians employed by NYC

agencies. These workers earn significantly lower salaries than most 1180 members. As of July 2004, clerical workers earned a maximum salary between \$28,971 and \$47,420 depending on their specific job title. This is the highest level of compensation for workers represented by this union (District Council 37 Collective Bargaining Agreement).

Although WEP students who are 1180 members earn relatively high salaries, many are single mothers supporting themselves and several children. Like many working class African Americans, they count upon substantially fewer assets – inheritance or property ownership, for example – than equally situated whites (Fine & Weis, 1998). According to the Women’s Center for Education and Career Advancement (2000), the salaries local 1180 members earn on average fall squarely within the range of what a family of one adult and two children would need to be self-sufficient in New York City. In 2000, based upon the cost of living city-wide, the self-sufficiency standard (which involves calculating average costs for housing, child care, food, transportation, health care and other expenses, as well as taxes and tax credits) for a family of three was \$51,583 per year, higher than in almost all other US cities. Thus, many 1180 members, like half of all New Yorkers, do not earn enough to support their basic living expenses (Kaufman, 2004).

Traditional determinants of socio-economic status, such as parental income, occupation, and education confirm my research participants’ working class roots (Conley, 1999). The most common occupations for my research participants’ fathers were factory workers, manual laborers, or railroad workers. Often mothers worked as janitors, factory and clerical workers, and in the home. In only a couple of instances

did parents own a small business such as a corner grocery store or restaurant in which both parents worked. With the exception of one father who went to college in the West Indies and one mother who received her Associate's degree as an adult, none of the parents had more than a high school education and many had substantially less formal education. Several parents attended no more than a couple of years of primary school and had only basic literacy skills. With the few exceptions noted above, my research participants were the first in their families to attend college. In many of their families, college completion was not the norm for their generation and at times it remains the exception, rather than the rule, for their children's generation as well. One of the most evident markers of their class status is the fact that the vast majority of my research participants did not attend college directly after high school because they needed, and expected, to enter the world of work.

Other, perhaps more useful, definitions of social class reject income, and even educational level, as the most important determinants of class location. Given the rising educational attainment in the U.S. discussed above, the disappearance of manufacturing jobs, and the unprecedented increase in purchasing power that globalization has provided workers in industrialized nations, definitions of social class have become confused and confusing (Aronowitz, 2003, Zweig, 2000). Common sense notions of what constitutes a middle class lifestyle and consumer potential often cloud workers' understanding of class as "the power some people have over the lives of others, and the powerlessness most people experience as a result" (Zweig, p. 11, 2000). Class, in this view, is less about income, lifestyle, or buying power than about "the power relations people experience" at work and in their lives

(Zweig, p. 37, 2000). In this sense, most WEP students remain firmly embedded in the working class despite the fact that they earn incomes that are, in most cases, substantially higher than what their parents' generation earned and hold higher status occupations. Their only power at work is that which has been negotiated for them by the municipal workers unions that represent them – unions that are not known for their militancy or trend-setting contracts. They are, at best, supervisors who have more in common with the people they oversee than upper management, much like a foreman who has inched his way up the ranks of a factory he clearly does not, nor will ever, own. Tellingly, several of my research participants refer to themselves as secretaries despite the ambiguous official job title of administrative associate, indicating their sense of their own stature – or lack thereof – on the job.

Despite the disappearance of industrial jobs traditionally associated with the working class, social class remains highly significant in structuring both my research participants' life chances and their aspirations. Not simply an economic category, social class is “deeply implicated in the production of subjectivity” (Walkerdine et al, p. 24, 2001). The research participants' memoirs are laced with a deep sense of class- (and race- and gender-) based limitations that impacted profoundly on their educational trajectories. Carmen, for example, only now realizes that as a working class Puerto Rican girl she was channeled into the world of work by her high school guidance counselors based upon her class and ethnicity. Despite distant dreams of completing college, Deborah, Florence, and Sandra all gravitated towards the pull of stable and gainful employment, swiftly and smoothly abandoning hopes of further education when the notification letter of their civil service employment arrived.

Decades later, they, like so many WEP students, remain employed in these same jobs unable to imagine a real alternative to them – despite their college degrees.

Mobility Outcomes

Of the fourteen WEP students who participated in my research, *none* experienced cross-class mobility as a result of their participation in the program. Rather, they – like most working class college graduates – have gleaned incremental gains from their degrees, moving into higher skilled working class occupations as a result of their educational attainment (Zweig, 2000).

Of the seven research participants who experienced career advancement within their workplaces, five attribute this advancement to their college education. Three of these students were promoted up the ranks of the civil service ladder and ultimately out of the union into positions within the agencies where they were previously employed. Although there is no official *requirement* for a college degree as a condition of advancement to these positions, and promotion to these positions is at the discretion of management, the students' perception is that their college educations, and the skills and confidence it brought them, were determining factors in their promotions. Gillian explains,

I didn't need to have a college degree to get them [the promotions] according to how the city works, but I think I grew on the job. I became more confident and I gained more skills and I could write better and I could communicate better. So, I think it [college] definitely helped on the job.

These promotions have brought the students who received them greater status, responsibility, and satisfaction in their work, as well as higher pay. Yet, they represent a form of limited, intra-class mobility rather than the cross-class mobility commonly associated with higher education attainment. None of these students used

their educational credentials to leave the agencies in which they had been employed, many for decades. They didn't test out the currency of their diplomas in the wider marketplace. Rather, they stayed within a familiar domain, fearful of losing the many benefits that accrue to long time civil service employees. Of those students who experienced career advancement, only one has plans to further activate her education for class mobility. Gillian, the youngest of my research participants, a 32 year old immigrant from the West Indies, has applied to law school and hopes to parlay her civil service experience working in a city agency into becoming a legal advocate for the poor. As my research came to a close, Gillian was struggling with whether or not her college education had sufficiently prepared her academically for the rigors of the LSAT and if it would guarantee her a spot in a top law school. Whether she will be able to parlay her education into the upward mobility she desires remains unknown.

Two other research participants received promotions in their jobs during and after their tenure in WEP, but are convinced their advancement is unrelated to their educational attainment. Samuel succinctly states that his advancement was simply the result of "being in the right place at the right time" and that no consideration was given to the educational credentials he'd accrued. Sandra, who advanced to a higher level of job responsibility within the same job title and pay scale, also states that her education was not a determining factor in her promotion. Rather, she recounts with a rueful laugh, when she finally returned to school she discovered that many of her colleagues believed she already had a college degree based upon the quality of her work performance.

Of the fourteen research participants, seven experienced *no* career advancement at all. The particulars of their employment and life circumstances present some specific dilemmas of mobility for WEP students which are explored below. Yet, this lack of mobility must be viewed through the broad lens of the global economy – the disappearance of working class jobs with livable wages; the diminishing numbers of unionized workers; the lack of jobs for increasing numbers of college graduates – and the limited mobility options available for middle-aged working class women of color, even those with college degrees.

Dilemmas of Mobility

Within the civil service jobs most WEP students hold, advancement is based upon the successful passing of promotional exams, the availability of jobs within a given agency, and the discretion of management. Presently, there is no mechanism that recognizes the attainment of an academic credential as criteria for promotion either within civil service jobs or advancement to management. Much discussion within the program and student body centers on a critique of the fact that the union has been unable or unwilling to negotiate a promotional ladder for students that considers educational credentials as a criterion for advancement. As a union staff person says,

when I talk to students I say, from my perspective at least, it [having a college education] makes you a better citizen, it gives you the ability to think and analyze, and that ought to make you a more marketable commodity. However, there is no guarantee that management is smart enough to recognize that...

He adds, “there is nothing in the [collective bargaining] agreement that says how management should select people for promotion to management positions...” further limiting students’ potential mobility options within the agencies where they are

currently employed. Hence, there is a contradiction between student expectations for their degrees as vehicles for advancement and the concrete parameters established under their union contract.

Given the lack of formal significance academic credentials have in the promotional processes of the agencies in which the students work, at times WEP students find themselves supervised by employees with less education than they have. This disparity in educational attainment often leads to envy and fear – on both sides. A WEP staff person confirms this dynamic. “I know that students work in very small settings, with very small minded managers, with very envious managers. How many times have you heard that people are fearful of surpassing their managers.... It’s a constant refrain.” Florence, for example, recounts that her supervisor, who is not a college graduate herself, feared she was out to get her job and openly questioned her motives in returning to school. Although a desire for career advancement was one motivating factor in her return to school, Florence felt compelled to downplay this saying it was “a personal thing.” Phyllis’ supervisor expressed her opposition to her pursuit of higher education by refusing to make minor scheduling accommodations for a class she needed to take. Sandra recalls that she was mistrusted by some of her fellow PAA’s because they felt she had been given too much authority and responsibility for a secretary. Nelly kept her college attendance under wraps at work so as not to inspire envy or reprisals. Her co-workers did not discover that she had returned to college until her name was mentioned in the union newspaper among a list of WEP graduates.

In other instances, students are hindered in their quest for advancement because there is no room for promotion within the small units where they are currently employed. Although the union represents workers in the same job titles in public agencies throughout the city, there is no formal mechanism for promotion from one unit to another within or across agencies. Brenda, who is a clerical worker, describes her workplace as a “dead end unit.” Sandra describes the inertia of the civil service system as “harder to advance but easier to stay.”

Given that many of the WEP students are PAA’s, a multi-level job title, in which assignment to higher levels and corresponding increases in pay are up to the discretion of management and are not subject to the grievance procedure or arbitration, workers have little recourse when they are held for years as PAA I’s, despite carrying out job responsibilities equivalent to a higher tier and beyond. Though some research participants expressed a sense of satisfaction in carrying out more challenging and meaningful work, they also resented not being awarded the corresponding title and salary.

Most significantly, WEP students experience the promotional process as biased and unfair. Not only are educational credentials not formally recognized as part of the criteria for advancement, there is a strong sentiment that racism and nepotism hinder their opportunities for advancement despite the ostensibly impartial promotional mechanism of the civil service. Sandra states outright,

Advancement in city agencies is based on nepotism. This is the number one complaint from city workers... people who are politically connected get better paying jobs and those who are not connected, basically get whatever the unions negotiate for them...

In describing her own work predicament, where she administers a program that develops low income housing yet has no title to match her job responsibilities, Sandra further explains,

While I feel a sense of satisfaction in the work that I do I am not happy with my status on the job. I have come a long way from my entry level work [as clerical worker] but it has taken way too long to get there. Had I been of another persuasion, white or politically connected, I have no doubt that I would be in a better position now and making the salary that goes with the position. That is not the case now because of racism and politics. I have no official title in the capacity of the work I do which is the same work as the other directors perform. Yet, they will not give me that title because I could use it to get money.

Her perspective is confirmed by a white union staff person who agrees,

I think there's a racial component to higher level [job] assignments, we did notice this at some point when we [the union] did a study on this, but I don't, I can't tell you what the numbers were, but when management is left to its own devices in discretionary promotions, they start looking like me at the higher levels.

Age is also a significant factor that limits my research participants' mobility aspirations and advancement. According to WEP internal data, the average age of a WEP student is forty-five. On average, my research participants have worked for the city as civil servants for twenty-three years. Given that retirement age under the union contract is fifty-five (with twenty-five years of service), many of my research participants are within a decade, or less, of retirement. Two of my research participants retired upon completing their degrees; another is actively planning her approaching retirement. Few WEP students can exchange the economic stability and security of their pension and health benefits for the possibility of advancement. Several are thinking actively and creatively about how they will use their educations

to make the next segment of their lives meaningful embarking upon second careers in retirement.

The jobs most of my student research participants hold are safe and secure and, importantly, have allowed those who are single mothers to provide for their children. Working for the city meant decent pay and better benefits – a significant step up from the low wage, non-union jobs many held prior to their first civil service assignments. Phyllis recalls how lucky she felt when she was called from the civil service list to get a job that provided health insurance for her two sons. Deborah writes of her return to the workplace after her divorce and the relief of a job that offered both security and the promise of possible advancement. Sandra recalls her early years working for the city and the ‘catch 22’ of security and stagnation.

As a single parent, it was more important to have a job where I could take off when I needed to take care of my son. I had heard a lot of horror stories about private industry and childcare. I didn’t need any extra pressure and didn’t want to gamble with my security... at this point, I was not thinking in terms of a career but thinking as a parent. My plate was already full and I just needed to survive.

Rosa describes the significance of this financial and job security for working class women and people of color in an unjust world,

You know why we work for government, I think. It’s perhaps because the government is where you can get work as a minority, where you can be assured a job, where you can be assured that you are going to get a promotion. Not that there isn’t favoritism, there is. But, generally, if you can pass the test and you score high, you are kind of assured that you are going to be successful... going into government, it’s kind of, like, safer...

WEP Structural Problems with Mobility

The higher education – mobility nexus represents a significant tension for WEP. The program both implicitly, and at times explicitly, capitalizes on the

assumption that a college degree will lead to job advancement and alternately resents the ways in which student desires for mobility impinge upon the ideological content and potential of the program. The director of WEP explains that,

there is a tension – or disconnect – between student intentions in coming to the program which are often connected to vague ideas of higher education leading to upward mobility and the program intention of preparing better educated union members to participate in their unions and better educated city workers to understand the issues that affect their jobs.

WEP promotional materials attempt to balance the competing interests at stake in providing higher education access for working adults who are union members.

Different versions of promotional brochures walk the tightrope of enticement and consciousness raising alternately promising “growth, opportunity, advancement” alongside mention of developing “a better educated citizenry and union membership to generate new ideas for social change.” Even the director of worker education acknowledges the tension,

... you know the students who come to us now, the adult students don't come to the program with a set of ideological views that attract them to the curriculum... Our students come to us, as you know, in large part because they want to get a degree. And urban studies sounds like it makes sense, a lot of them are from public sector unions and so they come to us and if we can transform them along the way that's great. But, they don't come to us because the curriculum says we are going to prepare you to become advocates in your union and your community.

One union staff person acknowledges the union's role in fomenting this contradiction/tension since it promotes the college program as a benefit for its members readily mentioning career advancement as a possible outcome without having negotiated a promotional ladder that recognizes a college degree as a criterion for promotion. He explains,

I think part of the problem is that in some ways union officials talk to students and say, we're helping to train you to get you promoted. And it's a position I don't support because my experience tells me that management doesn't recognize that academic accomplishment as qualifying them for promotion.

This is compounded by the widespread understanding among my research participants, and WEP students generally, that implicit in the generous tuition assistance the union has negotiated for them is a commitment to creating avenues for mobility for its members within their current workplaces (Bryant et al, 2003). A WEP staff person commented on this contradiction, noting:

They're [students] angry at the union, not angry but frustrated, because here you've given me all this, somebody said, the union has given me all this money for my degree, yet they can't negotiate a [promotional] ladder.

An assumed, yet faulty, premise that the program will lead to career advancement is exposed in the experiences of the majority of the students who, like my research participants, do not experience any or significant mobility as a result of their college education.

A faculty member muses over the inherent contradictions between the two opposing conceptions of education – education for upward mobility and education for critical consciousness – at play within the program and the inability of the program to articulate a coherent vision and practice of education that does not see these as intractably opposed.

One of the problems in the WEP is that there's not, there doesn't exist yet a kind of coherent workable alternative to the dominant ideology among students which is this mobility credential meritocracy. That ideology is extremely potent to people because it is so tenuous. People grab onto it like hell, because it's not sturdy...there's a certain desperation in that mobility thing... it's possible as a teacher to want to come in and get people off this ideological track which is a real obstacle to people thinking critically and wanting to learn something. And, yet what are you doing? You want to knock

somebody off this thing they've worked like hell to get a hold of and what are you offering in return?

In such a context, faculty can do little to pry apart the link between higher education and mobility in the students' minds, nor perhaps should they. But, in the absence of an alternate conception of the purpose and value of their degrees, students are left on their own to make sense of the program mission and pedagogy, their own desires for education as a vehicle for mobility, and a civil service promotional structure that does not always take their academic credentials into account. Nevertheless, students have responded thoughtfully and creatively to these tensions and with a fair share of anger and disappointment, as well. My research participants express a full spectrum of mobility desires which I will explore below.

Mobility Desires

Individual Mobility

Many students enter WEP with typical desires for individual mobility. They, of course, are not immune to the widespread belief that higher education leads to upward mobility. Samuel explains the ideology that impelled him, and many others, to get his college degree:

Well, it [a college education] was and still is, I think, the tool that opens the door for a lot of opportunities in a lot of capacities. I realized at a young age the importance of having a degree. I mean without it your opportunities are limited, so that was definitely a factor. And another factor is economics. You know, it opens the door for you to be able to make more money...

Lisa's initial impetus for enrolling in WEP stemmed directly from her desire for a credential. At one point in her career she left the civil service for a job in which the starting salary offered her was significantly lower than what was advertised because she did not have a college degree. Indignant that her skills, knowledge, and lengthy

work experience were considered insufficient, Lisa's desire for a credential was also a yearning for respect, to be seen as worthy of a certain salary. Lisa recalls,

I took a job as a job developer at a community college and the salary, I'll never forget it because it changed my life forever, the salary they were offering was \$40,000 or something like that and I applied. I had all the credentials and the background and the skills, but I didn't have the degree, so they didn't pay me \$40,000, they gave me \$32,000. And that was such an impact for me. I said to myself, this is the very last time I will *ever* be, or accept a position and not be given the money because I don't have a degree. I'm going to go get my credentials because I don't want that to happen to me again.

Lisa left this job almost immediately, returned to her former civil service position, and enrolled in WEP intent on rectifying this perceived injustice. Other students echoed this sense that opportunity for advancement is linked to a desire to be respected in the workplace. William reflects on his less than stellar educational history and its relationship to his stature at work.

That's always been a sore spot for me. Not having a formal education. This is a credential oriented society and not having a credential you are, sort of, I think people just don't respect you as much, especially in a business environment.

Even though a college degree may not be a formal requirement for advancement, many of my research participants sought further education to help them feel prepared for the challenges of promotion, to combat ingrained feelings of inadequacy that stopped them from applying for higher skilled jobs, and to make sure that their lack of credentials could not be used as a pretext for retaining them in lower paying, lower skilled jobs. Florence explains,

There were openings on my job that I thought I wanted to apply for, but somehow or other I always felt inadequate. I wasn't comfortable enough to apply because I thought my writing wasn't good... So I figured if I came back [to college] I would be in a better position to apply for the jobs and I wouldn't feel so inadequate.

Nelly also expresses her belief that not having a degree was a strike against her, even in a promotional process that does not formally recognize academic credentials as a requirement for advancement.

I feel more confident, there is no hesitation when I apply for different jobs. I'm not going to count on the years of experience to get me through the door. The fact that I have the degree now, I think it helps me. If they tell me no, I feel like, well I am not the one they're looking for. I don't feel I fell short in this area and that's why I wasn't able to get the position.

So widespread is the notion that adult students return to school because they seek mobility that Carmen finds it important to note in the first page of her memoir that “unlike the majority of adults whom I have heard tell why they decided to return to (or enroll for the first time in) college, my reason was not linked to career aspirations or to improving my financial potential.”

The sentiments expressed by my research participants were echoed, almost verbatim, by students interviewed as part of the worker education and social change participatory research project conducted in 2003 by myself and students in WEP. This report reveals the widespread belief that college and opportunities for upward mobility are inextricably linked in the students' imaginations and aspirations (Bryant et al, 2003).

Mobility for Family and Racial/Ethnic Community

For several of my research participants, their desire for upward mobility was tightly bound to their aspirations for their family, community, and ethnic/racial group. Rather than a rugged individualist notion of mobility that severs those who have moved up from their working class roots, the memoirs conjured up a sense of mobility that sought to bring family and community along on the journey. As mothers

often a primary impetus for returning to school was to be an example for their children, and other extended family members. Brenda and her son attended college simultaneously, although at different universities. Their commitment to graduate together kept them straight on the course towards their goal despite obstacles that emerged. In her memoir, Brenda reflects,

Not only did I continue attending classes, but my son also continued. It was when adversities came in our midst that we promised not to stop halfway through our college education. It was important that we keep our promises, as each other's endurance meant support for each other. He completed his undergraduate degree a year ago and is quite happy he stayed in school.

Sandra's return to college was spurred on by the realization that her son, then a junior in high school, did not want to attend college. Determined to reverse the poor role model she believes she has set for him, Sandra applied to WEP. Sandra recalls this painful realization,

Whenever we talked about college, it always ended with my son turning the conversation on me. He would say, if college was so important then why was I a dropout? Throwing that up in my face hurt. I couldn't let him get away with it, but it was the truth. The only alternative I had was to change it...I could serve as an example to him and complete my own education at the same time.

Rosa concurs, "I felt I needed to be an example for my children. They needed to know that higher education was an attainable goal." Florence returned to school only after her daughter had finished college, but they now tag-team child care and other domestic responsibilities as her daughter works to finish a master's degree in early childhood education at the same time that Florence completes her B.A. degree.

But, upward mobility, for several of my African American research participants was not simply a struggle to improve the material conditions of their lives, but was linked to a larger struggle for freedom from race-based restrictions and

limitations (Cole & Omari, 2003; Gilkes, 1983). As Higginbotham & Weber (1992) note in their study of upward social mobility among white and black women, “many black women expressed a sense that their mobility was connected to an entire racial uplift process, not merely an individual journey” (p. 437). This sentiment was evident in several of the memoirs.

Deborah’s original impetus to return to school came not from work or family, but her church. She was encouraged by her pastor to seek secular education to complement her religious studies. From the start, Deborah hoped to use her education to fulfill her “life’s objective to serve community and humanity to the best of my ability” in her combined roles as “parent, teacher, counselor, administrator, chaplain, and evangelist.” Deborah is engaged in a myriad of community activities where she has put her spiritual commitments and education to work – as a religious instructor at church extension centers, as a per diem counselor for a foster care service agency, as a volunteer hospital chaplain, and, hopefully, in her retirement as a missionary in Africa. Deborah sees her spiritual and educational achievements as entwined, both strengthening her commitment to lift up those members of her congregation and community who are less fortunate than herself.

The early pages of Florence’s memoir detail in depth the hard times her parents experienced as poor African Americans who were denied educational and employment opportunities because of their race and class. Her parents’ dream for their children was that they get the education they themselves had been denied. Florence realizes this dream years after both of her parents have died, after decades of start and stop college attendance. Her education is a tribute to the legacy they left

behind – “a legacy of determination” to use education to better their lives, a belief that education would lift their children – and implicitly the race – out of a life of struggle.

Phyllis’ memoir firmly establishes her commitment to education as rooted in her experience as a “descendant of slaves.” She is acutely aware of the limits placed on African American educational attainment – under slavery and to the present day – but also begins college very hopeful that it will bring her upward mobility. Phyllis frames this desire for mobility in the context of the limits placed on African Americans in a racist society. Phyllis’ memoir beautifully depicts this merging of individual and collective desires for uplift; her use of *we* rather than *me* is striking and consistent throughout her entire memoir. Her own advancement is entwined with that of her people, much as the constraints racism places on her are experienced by the collective body of African Americans. In her memoir Phyllis reflects on the early phases of her college career and her hopes for mobility:

I wanted to believe that pursuit of higher education would provide me with the required skills and knowledge to unlock the doors that were once shut to *my people*, a means of financial independence and upward mobility in a professional career. (Emphasis mine)

Later Phyllis comments, “as much as things have changed for *my people*, many things have remained the same,” reflecting on her own limited upward mobility and the role she sees racism playing in her stagnant career. (Emphasis mine) Phyllis’ reflection on her youngest son’s murder reveals her deep belief in the importance of education to the African American community. Even this tragedy she sees as a collective loss, not simply an individual one, much as she sees her aspirations for mobility as extending to the larger community to which she feels inextricably bound.

... my baby boy was kidnapped, beaten and shot five times in the borough of Queens over a dispute of a cellular telephone that he had stolen. In the black culture, there is a code on the street which goes beyond the laws established by a society. It is tragic that many African American young males do not understand the bigger picture, and as a result, I believe they contribute to the genocide of *our people*... His [murderer's] limited education provided him with a myopic perception of life....I felt that the entire trial was a tragedy, a waste of life, and I mourned not only for my great loss, but for the loss of so many young black males who did not make better decisions for their life. (emphasis mine)

Yet, my research reveals that the WEP has done little to weave students' entwined desire for individual mobility and collective racial uplift into a coherent tapestry. That which is hinted at in some of the memoirs remains oblique and unrealized in the program, its potential untapped. This theme is further explored in chapter 7.

Mobility for Meaningful Work

Several of my research participants seek education as a vehicle for mobility to meaningful work. Rather than aspirations based on earnings or status, these students yearn for employment options and opportunities that will add meaning to their lives and those of others. These are students who find their current working conditions secure, stable, and at the same time stultifying. They desire to use more of themselves and their intellects in their work and, in exchange, hope to do work where they feel respected and acknowledged for what they are contributing.

April's desire for meaningful work came on the heels of five long years of domestic work as a new immigrant to the United States. April remembers this time as "the most dormant period of my life. Looking back the only good thing I got out of those years was my 'green card.'" In her memoir, April succinctly explains:

Most of all I want to work at a job where I will be able to contribute meaningfully. I think this is a combination of wanting to do meaningful work and wanting to be validated.

Ivy sees her college experience at the WEP as stimulating her downward mobility into a more “fulfilling career.” After 10 years as an employee in an accounting firm, she both relishes and fears the opportunity to parlay her degree into more socially conscious, personally meaningful employment. As she nears graduation, her memoir reveals her mulling over this potential move into lower paying work. She considers, and rejects, work in an activist organization although she recalls with passion and commitment her participation in anti-war and immigrants’ rights protests while a student at WEP – a first for her. Although she is sure she wants to do work that is more in line with her values – values she says she uncovered during her tenure at WEP – she is reluctant to give up the security of her current position for the low wages and long hours of a struggling social justice organization. Instead, she’s decided in favor of something meaningful, but more secure, like teaching ESL or social work, careers that would engage her life experience as the child of Chinese immigrants and the critical consciousness she honed at WEP. Her deepest desire is to do work that is meaningful to her and others, to be socially useful.

A small contingent of my research participants is seeking more meaningful work as part of a second career after retirement. In addition to the many community activities she is already engaged in, Deborah hopes to spend her retirement as a missionary in Africa. Rosa, whose retirement precipitated a move to another state, finds herself struggling to locate meaningful work as a second career. She is struggling to find a place for herself, her values, and the political consciousness she

developed while at WEP, in the conservative, southern, anti-union state to which she has relocated. Rosa is acutely aware of the forces working against her finding a niche for herself and is battling her own conscience around whether it is enough to simply be a (political and educational) role model for her family. As my research drew to a close, Rosa had been the victim of racially motivated harassment in the first job she found and had not yet discovered a satisfactory resolution to the dilemma of finding socially useful work in the second phase of her career – retirement.

Sandra essentially began her second career while still employed by the city, as a tenant organizer in the building where she lives. A fortuitous intersection of her work experience, her urban studies major, and the deteriorating conditions in the building where she lives led her head first into the role of community organizer. When canvassers for a housing organization came to her door, Sandra “was gung ho about what I was willing to do... as a result I was thrust into the role of a tenant leader” in the campaign to improve living conditions in her building (which had essentially been abandoned by a derelict landlord). Through this work, she writes,

I attended meetings with the landlord and represented tenants in meetings with federal, state and city officials. I participated in letter writing campaigns, gathered signatures for petitions, held meetings in my home, delivered public speeches and supported housing legislation.

This parallel work life as an activist brings Sandra the satisfaction and meaning she sought through education related job advancement. She reflects on how her understanding of the purpose of a degree has changed over time, as she has engaged in community organizing and found purpose and meaning there. She writes in her memoir,

There are many lessons to be learned from my pursuit of a college degree. I finally realized that I was pursuing status and not an education... I started out wanting a degree/status and ended up getting a very special education...

Sandra has been offered a job working for the community organization that led the campaign in her building upon her retirement from the city.

Even Gillian, the only one of my research participants with clearly laid plans for upward mobility through law school, rejects the idea of becoming a “career building bureaucrat” and hopes her legal degree will enable her to “be one of the dying few who care about and act on behalf on the well being of the underrepresented and overlooked.” She has put her own spin on mobility, seeking socially useful work as an attorney. Gillian hopes to become an “advocate within the system” she has come to know through her work and has grown to understand through her education at WEP.

Lack of Mobility and Critical Consciousness

It is precisely the failure to attain mobility that became one of the sources of deepest critical insight for some of my research participants. Rather than course curriculum or program pedagogy sparking the development of critical consciousness in students, it was their lived experience that unraveled the myth of education as a vehicle for mobility and led several of them to their most critical insights about education and society and themselves. Sandra exemplifies this transformation. In her memoir, she reflects on how her thinking about her education has evolved:

I used to think that a college degree would open up positions that were otherwise closed. I thought my lack of credentials kept me from advancing. The truth of the matter is that it was not [lack of] credentials that keep me from advancing but supervisors and managers who decided the opportunities I was given or denied. Even though I had earned my degree before being given

this job, I am positive it had nothing to do with me getting the assignment. Ironically, many of my colleagues thought I already had a degree...

Phyllis' experience of lack of mobility is the most bittersweet of all my research participants, perhaps because her mobility aspirations were loftier, her sense of stagnation on the job more extreme. Despite receiving both her Bachelor's and Master's degrees from WEP, Phyllis continues to do secretarial work, stymied in her quest for advancement by nepotism, small-minded managers, and racism. Her memoir focuses extensively on the evolution of her understanding of the education-mobility nexus and her pain at relinquishing her aspirations for what a degree might mean. She writes,

I wanted to believe that the pursuit of higher education would provide me with the required skills and knowledge to unlock the doors that were once shut to my people, means of financial independence and upward mobility in a professional career. No one ever told me there would be other barriers – such as, 'it's not what you know, but who you know,' or that some people are like crabs in a barrel all scurrying to climb to the top, while pushing others down to the bottom as opposed to lending a helping hand. The bible, Ecclesiastes 1:18 states: 'For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.' While education has afforded me ... wisdom, it has increased my sorrow. Sorrow to know that in as much as things have changed for my people, many things remain the same.

While Phyllis understands that her experience is not unique and she is grateful for the critical consciousness she has gained through her education, this insight is nevertheless a painful one for her. Her memoir describes this:

As I embarked upon my last undergraduate semester, there was a profound unhappiness within my soul... I began to realize that I was unhappy because I had come to recognize that my degree only meant I had persevered. It was not going to unlock the doors for upward mobility within my career... The realization of the aforementioned did bring some solace, as the myth that has been perpetuated by society that education will open the doors to a successful future, one that I sincerely believed in, has now come to fruition. I have tested the waters of our great society, and many things are just lies, but more importantly, education has provided me with the ability to decipher the lies,

and I am no longer confused. So yes, the positive end result is that I no longer have to chase after the ‘American Dream’ when the dream was never intended for my people. I can now focus on being happy with what I have obtained as a result of my educational pursuits, because I now also know that money, power, and all the materialistic things will not bring you happiness, but knowing the truth shall set you free from trying to obtain those things.

Sandra is also aware that the program social justice goals bump up against student aspirations for job advancement through higher education. This unreconciled tension lies under the surface as students grapple with their own lack of mobility. Sandra reflects on her own process of transformation and the ironic way in which her new sense of the purpose and meaning of education match up more closely with that articulated by some program faculty and staff and in WEP’s mission. Although Sandra is not unique in finding her mobility dreams hampered, she is somewhat rare in embracing this alternate view of what education is for. In her memoir, she reflects on this evolution:

Tania [staff person] kept harping on the community this and the community that. But, we didn’t want to hear that at that time [early in her tenure at WEP], we didn’t want to hear that, we had our own dreams and we knew where we wanted to go and where we wanted to be. We were still in the same mindset that you go to college and you get a degree and you go out and get a job and it was all about self. And you make more money so you can buy more things. And that was basically where we were headed...and then I think it began to penetrate, like wait a minute, look at what has been done to us. And then you sort of realize that you are just a product of your experience. And if you don’t want to be a participant in your own destruction then you have to change your whole mindset. So, then I stopped thinking in terms of me and started thinking in a bigger and broader sense in terms of us.

Several of my research participants expressed disappointment with their lack of mobility, articulating a vague sense that *something* was supposed to happen when they graduated from college and didn’t. Sandra writes,

I had been led to believe that college graduates were more successful than others. With that in mind I was determined to get a degree...more than two

decades would pass before my dream materialized. When I finally graduated I felt like something was supposed to happen and it didn't.

Gillian, Phyllis, and Deborah all concur that their graduation from college represented an anti-climax compared to what they expected from this long anticipated event.

Deborah writes that she does not plan to attend her own college graduation because she doesn't know why she would. Gillian ponders what her degree means,

It's funny, I felt like I needed it [a college degree] and now that I have it it almost feels like nothing. It feels like absolutely nothing... I thought it would make me feel... *where is it?* Where is this thing that's supposed to happen once I get it?

Thus, commencement represents much less than a new beginning for many of my research participants. Most remain employed in the same agencies and jobs. They have little they can name or show for the years of sacrifice and struggle they put into getting their degrees. Their amorphous sense of themselves as different and enhanced often does not measure up against the socially defined expectation that college graduation will bring upward mobility. For Phyllis and Sandra this moment of emptiness upon graduation leads to a re-definition of what a college education is for and about in an important moment of critical consciousness for them. Others remain hopeful, still others resigned.

Concluding Thoughts

While my research participants' mobility aspirations were real and acutely felt, they also seemed to represent only the first layer in a complex web of motivations that led them to attend college as adults. At times, it seemed that mobility masqueraded for other reasons these adult students, particularly women, returned to school. Ironically, and perhaps conveniently, mobility aspirations at times operated as

a subterfuge for other latent intellectual desires, as a socially accepted justification for seeking a college education later in life (themes I explore more fully in chapter 4).

Yet, it is precisely these hidden desires and motivations that may keep adult students in school, especially when their prospects for career advancement don't pan out.

Furthermore, while some of my research participants seemed content to bask in the satisfaction, and rest from the exhaustion, of having finally completed college, others were clearly bitten by the education bug. Five out of fourteen student research participants went on to get Master's degrees through WEP and, as my research drew to a close, Gillian was applying to law school, Phyllis was enrolled in a theological seminary, and William was completing a professional training course offered by a university through his workplace. Education has proven to be a deeply satisfying endeavor for many of my research participants, a space in which to grow and develop as adults. It also, for some students, seems to operate as a proxy for the mobility they desired. Given the dead end nature of many of their jobs and the job market, school ends up acting as a surrogate for a more meaningful career. Despite having abandoned hopes of achieving significant mobility through their educations, some students continue to pursue further education deriving the satisfaction from their studies that they at one time had hoped to achieve through their careers.

Although WEP students, by and large, did not fulfill their mobility desires through their return to higher education, that so many completed their degrees is a testament to their belief in education, their desire for intellectual fulfillment, and their willingness to allow education to change their conceptions of the worth and purpose of a college degree. Their remarkable persistence becomes even more noteworthy

when, in the following chapter, I explore the roots of WEP students' academic motivation in an effort to more fully understand their educational journeys in, and out of, schools.

Chapter 4

“An education cannot be taken from you”

The Academic Motivation of Adult Worker College Students

“How do I begin to explain how and why I have been able to sustain my pursuit of my educational endeavors? It is intermingled in my cultural heritage, it is a part of my religious beliefs, it is in my family history, and it is embedded within my life experiences.” (Phyllis, WEP student)

In this chapter, I explore the academic motivation of the working class women and men of color who chose to return to college at WEP as adults. I arrived at the theme of academic motivation because the conventional explanation for why adult students seek out higher education – social and economic mobility – did not sufficiently explain why my research participants returned to and stayed in college. Although many of my research participants had instrumental aims in attaining a college education, as explored in Chapter 3, their desires for mobility sit alongside a real and heartfelt quest for intellectual growth and personal fulfillment through higher education. These parallel narratives – of mobility aspirations and academic motivation – together flesh out our understanding of these adults’ experience in schools and the meanings they assign their return to and persistence in college. Their memoirs tell an important counter-story to the more popular one of low achievement motivation and academic failure among African American and other “involuntary minority” students (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1974; 2003).

I did not set out to investigate achievement motivation among my research participants nor to explain why these particular students were able to retain and/or recover their high educational aspirations despite the vicissitudes of schools. Rather, my research participants’ stories – in concert with my commitment to “dialectical

theory building” (Lather, 1986) – forced me to examine the ways in which exclusionary acts based on race, within ostensibly integrated school settings, acted to diminish their high academic aspirations. Their memoirs depicted almost uncannily high academic motivation in great contrast to their harsh experiences in desegregating schools – settings that had great costs for black students (Galletta, 2003; Morris & Morris, 2002; Walker, 1996). It seemed important to pay close attention to these stories and the remarkable fact that, despite the ways in which racism acted to diminish their academic motivation, my research participants were able to retain and/or recover their faith in education and their desire to continue a life in schools.

Given the vast educational literature dedicated to documenting and explaining African American and other involuntary minority students’ low achievement motivation and their supposed opposition to schooling (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1974; 2003), my research participants’ academic motivation seemed all the more noteworthy, and important, to record. Their experiences seemed significant precisely because they showed how the erosion of their achievement motivation was not a legacy of slavery, as theorized by Ogbu (1974) and others, but the direct consequence of contemporary racism (Cross, 2003; Galletta & Cross, in press; Spencer et al, 2003). My research participants’ memoirs clearly demonstrate that “contemporary systemic causal factors” were key to undermining their achievement motivation (Spencer et al, 2003). My research revealed how their identities as African Americans, rather than serving to separate them from schools (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), were often the wells from which their academic motivation sprang. Many of these students exemplify an African American

tradition that sees education as an integral part of the struggle against racial oppression (Anderson, 1988; Butchart, 1980; Cross, 2003; Perry et al, 2003; Walker, 1996). Several of my research participants explicitly situate their educational aspirations in the context of the denial of education their forebears experienced and their sustained academic motivation comes, at least in part, from a commitment to fulfill the educational aspirations of those who came before them.

Lastly, it is important to note that my research participants' ability to maintain and/or recover their academic motivation is also about opportunity (and lack thereof), a construct often ignored in research on minority students' academic achievement (Fine et al, 2004; Gandara, 1995; O'Connor et al, forthcoming). The specific ways in which WEP worked to enable adult students to realize their long held educational dreams and ambitions will be explored more fully in chapter 5. But, the fact that most of my research participants made several prior attempts at higher education, all of which failed, indicates that their academic aspirations might have remained thwarted had they not chanced upon WEP. Thus, the experience of these particular students in this specific program suggests that school level structures can mediate, to some degree, societal determinants of academic failure and/or success.

The specific question of why my research participants were able to retain and/or recover their high achievement motivation seems worthy of further scrutiny and would make excellent material for a follow-up study. My research simply uncovers some preliminary trends. Certainly, my participants' individual agency was a key determining factor. Though this finding fails to illuminate how we might protect other vulnerable students' educational ambition, it must be recognized.

Families, as explored in this chapter, played an ambivalent role in fostering educational ambition – sometimes they did, sometimes they couldn't. Schools were also sites of initial support for academic achievement and, later, sources of discouragement, exclusion, and trauma. While I can offer no definitive explanation as to why these particular students persisted and others have not, I believe it's valuable to paint the portraits of these academically motivated adult students – to learn from their journeys, to hear their stories, to credit their persistence, to celebrate their achievement – despite the odds.

Early High Achievers

Resonating through the memoirs and interviews, was a profound sense of joy and pride in learning that many of my research participants experienced as young children. Many fondly recall their early school experiences and their burgeoning identities as readers and learners. Despite the passing of time, and the vicissitudes of schooling, this early educational motivation was vividly, and tenderly, remembered by many. Florence evokes this image of herself in her memoir, “Reading was my friend and I was often found in my room curled up with a book or down at the neighborhood library.”

Phyllis echoes this sentiment as she describes the foundation for her adult educational aspirations.

Reading was a big thing in my house because we had one television... and my mother was not into us watching a lot of television. Back then, the television plug you used to be able to pull it out, so when she had to go she would pull the cord out and take it with her. So, you had to read your homework, you had to read different books. It was mandatory that you would go to the library.

Samuel reflects back on his early education almost wistfully.

As a student, I always enjoyed school. I always enjoyed school. My mom said that I never had a problem with school, they never had a problem with me because I enjoyed going to class. I wasn't one of those kids who didn't want to be in school, if anything, I enjoyed being in that environment. So I was a pretty good student throughout all my tenure.

Deborah also recalls school with fondness and enthusiasm. "Since the first grade I loved going to school. In fact I became upset when I came down with the measles and was not allowed to go to school."

For Brenda, school was not simply a source of joy, but an arena in which she could exert agency in her young life. At an early age, she devised a plan to attend an academically superior primary school – not just the one across the street from her house – so that she would have a better chance of winning a scholarship to high school in her home country in the West Indies. Executing this long range plan for educational success involved sacrifices. She writes, "At times it was rough, as I recall having to walk for about two miles, back and forth each day, sometimes in the pouring rain" if she missed her free ride from a neighbor.

Academic Motivation and African American Identity

For many of my African American research participants, their racial identity is the well from which their academic motivation springs. Within and against the histories of denial of educational opportunity, lies many of my research participants' entrenched motivation for education. These students exemplify an African American tradition that values education as an integral part of the struggle against racial oppression (Anderson, 1988; Butchart, 1980; Cross, 2003; Perry, 2003; Walker, 1996). They see their educational aspirations as connected to the denial of education

their forebears experienced and to their commitment to fulfill the aspirations of those who came before them, yet lacked the opportunity.

The first lines of Phyllis' memoir hone in on the deep link between her racial identity and her educational aspirations. She asks rhetorically,

How do I begin to explain how and why I have been able to sustain my pursuit of my educational endeavors? It is intermingled in my cultural heritage, it is a part of my religious beliefs, it is in my family history, and it is embedded within my life experiences.

She unravels these entwined strands of heritage and experience, explaining how her academic motivation is rooted in the historic denial of educational opportunity to African Americans.

My parents are descendants of slaves, therefore so am I! In America, we are a group of people that not so long ago were viewed as no more than property, to the degree that the pursuit of educational undertakings was unheard of. Attempting to pursue educational achievements, during that era, would warrant punishment such as being shot at, lynched, and severely beaten by the 'Master'.

Phyllis expounds broadly on this history of educational exclusion in her memoir, bringing her readers to contemporary struggles for educational equity. Immediately following a detailed description of the racism her older siblings experienced in desegregated schools, Phyllis writes: "While this was not my experience, I sought education because I wanted knowledge and wisdom in an attempt to understand [what her siblings and parents had experienced]." Later she reiterates her understanding of the relationship between education and race in her life, "Education has helped to remove the childhood veil that once concealed my innocent eyes of the racism America has woven so intricately within their social policies and laws."

The narrative structure of Florence's memoir reveals how her educational history and aspirations are rooted in her family's denial of educational opportunity as poor African Americans and their deep belief in education as a vehicle for uplift. The first five pages of her memoir are dedicated to painstakingly detailing her parents' blunted educational desires before she even mentions her own educational endeavors or accomplishments. Florence is careful to instruct her readers that her parents' limited educational and employment achievements were due, not to lack of ambition, but lack of opportunity based on class and race. Florence reflects on the educational aspirations her parents instilled in her and writes, "When I complete my studies, I want my children and grandchildren to know that I did it to fulfill a promise I made to my parents many years ago..."

The entwined nature of educational opportunity, achievement, and race is omnipresent for many of my research participants. When queried about whether anyone else in his family had gone to college, William simply responded, "No. It's only a couple of generations removed from slavery." Clearly, to him, his family members' limited education resulted from a denial of opportunity, not a lack of desire or motivation.

Educational Motivation Derailed by Schools

Many of my research participants' narratives revealed a striking dichotomy in the way they described their early, and later, educational experiences. Their journeys reveal a tipping point at which joy in learning is dampened and their educational motivation is dimmed by negative experiences in schools. Few describe a seamless elementary through high school experience unmarred in some way by the negative

impact of race, class, or gender. Though this was not the focus of my research, this successive diminishment of academic motivation, and concomitant academic success, bled through their stories as my participants attempted to describe how they got to be adult college students. My research participants attribute this tempering of educational motivation to three primary factors – acts of racial exclusion in desegregating schools, tracking, and academically inferior education – which are explored below.

Racism in Desegregating Schools

Several of my research participants attended desegregating schools in the 1960's and 1970's precisely because their parents had high educational aspirations for them. It is ironic, then, that it is this experience that led to a diminishment of their academic motivation and at times had a directly negative impact on their achievement. This phenomenon, which is more common than widely believed, has been documented by scholars (Galletta, 2003; Galletta & Cross, in press; Morris & Morris, 2002; Walker, 1996).

Deborah reflects, in her memoir, on the impact of racism in the desegregating high school she attended. She writes,

Life at [my] high school was not exactly full of exciting memories. This was a newly built high school which was in an all white community. The zones were redefined so that the High School was forced to open enrollment to Black students. The new zoning included as well as ended with the block on which I lived at that time. So I was attending a high school under racial stress... we (the poor Black and Hispanic students) were left to fend for ourselves.

Reflecting upon the impact this had on her educational achievement, Deborah underlines the important role her parents played in mediating the negative influence these school experiences had on her educational ambitions. She recalls,

I had parents who up front talked about this type of situation and how in spite of it we had to excel and strive. It affected me, but it didn't affect me to the extent that it affected others. Because being treated this way, one might feel inferior and withdraw....

Her memoir succinctly explains, "I survived because I was determined to do so."

Florence describes what it was like when her mother, seeking the best possible education for her children, had her bused to a predominantly white school. In her memoir she writes at length about this pivotal educational experience.

In the early sixties, at the height of the civil rights movement, my siblings and I were pulled from our neighborhood school and bused to a school in a predominantly white neighborhood. Our old school lacked resources and experienced staff to improve our knowledge. Most of the children in the neighborhood school had the same reader, which they memorized. Our young minds were not challenged enough to think for ourselves. I entered P.S. 153 in Queens, at the beginning of second grade. There, I was exposed to a world of learning that I did not know existed...

Initially, Florence excels in this new school environment which has, by her accounts, both more qualified and demanding teachers and greater resources. She recalls,

At the end of fourth grade my parents were told I would be promoted to the top fifth grade class because of my ability to handle the schoolwork thus far. My parents were very pleased and so was I...

Yet, despite having parents with high educational aspirations for their children, Florence was unable to escape desegregating schools with her educational motivation entirely unscathed. Florence writes,

All my days at my new school were not good. I met discrimination and other people's prejudices for the first time...Fifth grade was different. I was the only black student in my new class...the teacher was the one who chose for whatever reason to separate me from the other students.

On a school trip Florence is made to her ride by herself on the bus instead of sitting next to a white classmate. This experience leaves her deeply unhappy and

unsettled. She writes about the impact of being the sole black child in her class in a predominantly white school:

My grades began to slip because I did not want to be separated from my real friends, of course [those] who rode the school bus with me. I did not enjoy being singled out, either.

Nevertheless, Florence continues to excel academically and she is eligible to seek a scholarship to a private junior high school. This is the last straw in her pursuit of equitable educational opportunity. She writes,

That year, I was eligible to take several exams that would qualify me to skip a grade or attend a private school paid for by the Board of Education. I took the exam for a private school in Jackson Heights, Queens. The school seemed very nice. I received a notice that another student and I had received the same highest score. A decision was made to accept the other student who was a white male. My mother was ready to fight to get me accepted... but that day on the bus came back to mind and I did not want to be singled out again so my mother let it go. Instead of graduating in the fifth grade, I stayed until the sixth grade and graduated with my friends who rode the school bus with me everyday....My education continued... I worked hard but not as hard as I could. That one incident left a scar that reminds me every time injustice is shown towards me.

Yet, despite or perhaps because of this history of injustice, Florence retained a glimmer of her former educational ambitions, graduating high school with an academic diploma and enrolling immediately in college, only to leave a couple of semesters later, because of financial pressures, when called from the civil service list to work for the city.

In reflecting on his early education, William recounts a similar experience in the predominantly white elementary school he attended.

Every year they would post who got the highest reading score in the school and that particular year, they didn't do it. And a kid in my class, Joey Petuna, I'll never forget, I said, they didn't put it up this year. And he said, you got the highest reading score. And I said, you're kidding me. And he said, yea. I was

surprised and I asked the teacher and she said, yea, you did. But, at the time, we were so few black kids in the school, they were just not going to post it.

Although he does not describe in detail his journey from being the pupil with the highest reading score to high school drop out, the irony of the transformation is not lost on William. He simply says,

High school was short lived. I'm a high school drop out. I got my GED... I was usually in special progress [upper track classes] in junior high. But, in a matter of years, the whole thing just sort of crumbled....

Ivy, the daughter of Chinese immigrants and the only one of my research participants to attend parochial school had strikingly similar experiences to the African American students. In her memoir she describes in detail the painful impact of an education based on competition and conformity, but concludes,

Much more importantly, Prep is the first place where I encountered discrimination. As a minority, I never felt comfortable, like I belonged, always an outsider.... Come graduation time I was so happy and very relieved just like an inmate being released after serving his prison term.

Sandra's first foray into higher education resonates with the same sense of alienation and exclusion experienced by those research participants who attended desegregating high schools. Her memoir explores the entwined impact of inferior secondary education and racism on her college experience as one of few black students on a predominantly white campus.

I selected [College X] as my college of choice only because it was close to home. In college, I learned that I had been cheated out of a quality education. I had to take remedial courses in math and reading. My stay at College which was between 1972 and 1976 was my first introduction to the real world. I had always attended predominantly black schools before. The only white people I encountered were my teachers, shoppers, or TV characters. Social interaction with white people was isolated. Sometimes I felt like a fish out of water like when I would be the only black student in class. Feeling like an outcast was a heavy burden to carry... I did three semesters of psychology and barely passed each time. My psychology professors and I were often at odds about

research findings on black people. Most of it was a lot of negative stuff about us that I did not accept...

Sandra recounts in great detail the experience of having her speech corrected by a white professor in a public speaking class who insisted that her southern pronunciation was simply wrong. She recalls the sense of isolation she experienced on this predominantly white campus and how her alienation and lack of academic preparation for college level work compounded to undermine her academic motivation and led her to drop out of school.

I just never got connected [at college]. I can't remember making one white friend while I was there. Black folks went one way and white folks went another. There was hardly any interaction between them. I didn't feel like I really belonged there, it was like being on borrowed time... Eventually I failed a couple of classes and dropped classes here and there. Before long I was placed on academic probation... I had had enough.

Impact of Tracking

Although many of my research participants were placed in upper track classes in elementary and junior high school, tiered education was most certainly used to constrain their educational aspirations as they reached high school. Several of my research participants recount how they were "advised" away from academics and into vocational tracks, steered away from college into work because of their class, race, and gender.

Lisa recalls the moment her aspirations were derailed by a math teacher in high school. She explains,

I went to an all girls high school that was predominantly, I think most of the kids there were Caucasian, Jewish and Italian and we felt kind of like we were being 'bused in' because it was in the upper west Bronx... and there weren't that many African American children that attended that high school. I got good grades except for math and the teacher was mean and called people who didn't understand math stupid and my mom had to come to school because I

think I failed one test or whatever. And instead of being on an academic track, they told my mother that I would not graduate unless she agreed to change my curriculum from academic to commercial. That all Lisa would be able to do was become a secretary or do domestic work and, you know, you're sitting there and you're hearing this and at the time, my mother was like, oh, cause you know black people are afraid of academia. They weren't aware of it. And, so, of course, she agreed... and instead of being on an academic track for college, I was changed to a commercial [track].

Carmen echoes this experience reflecting on how she was steered from upper track classes into the world of work by high school guidance counselors who could not see past her class, gender, and ethnicity. In her memoir, Carmen recalls,

I was not a dumb kid; I was fairly intelligent and tracked into the higher academic classes throughout my middle and high school years. However, when I was in my last two years of high school, my advisors – if you can call them that – did not encourage me to pursue college.

She is explicit about the reasons why: "...the counselors saw this Puerto Rican girl who belonged on the job market, she didn't belong in college."

Impact of Academically Inferior Education

My research reveals a slow slide, for many of my research participants, from being placed in "special progress" classes to becoming academically underprepared. Sandra recalls the contrast of being placed in upper track classes through junior high school with the mediocre education she received in a failing high school that left her academically unprepared for college. Gillian also recounts ruefully how she ended up in a high school known for its shoddy academic standards and high dropout rate. April describes how budget cuts in education in her country of origin led to the loss of some of her high school's best instructors and most challenging courses and an impoverished education for those who could not afford private school.

Embedded in many of the memoirs were deep fears about returning to college and of being academically unprepared for college level work. April reflects in her memoir on the link between her procrastination in applying to college and her fear of being academically unprepared.

I made an important discovery about my procrastination, it stems from my fear of failure. I am afraid to fail so I put off starting; if I never start or try, I can't fail...Fear of failure is a powerful obstacle. Deep down inside I did not believe I had what it took to complete a college degree. None of my other brothers or sisters did or even ventured to, so who am I to think I could?

In fact, the majority of my research participants required remediation, most commonly in math, upon starting their studies at WEP. Although several of my research participants passed the City University entrance exams in reading and writing while previously enrolled in other colleges, a number of them did not.

Carmen struggled with academic writing when she first entered college and was placed in a remedial writing class like several of my research participants. She was grateful for this opportunity to learn what she was never taught in high school, yet she reflects in her memoir on the deficiencies of the system that graduated her.

I think back to my twelve years in New York City's public education system and wonder how I got by without really learning the foundation skills for writing. I can't blame the system entirely; I was partly responsible for not wanting to learn... Yet shouldn't my teachers have caught on that I wasn't applying what they were teaching? Understanding as I do now the discriminatory nature of public school education in a capitalist system, I know I was not entirely to blame for my lack of writing skills. At the time, I did not know I was being discriminated against.

Many of my research participants discovered, only after having their academic skills tested and sharpened in college, how deeply unprepared for higher education they were by the inner city high schools they attended.

Families and Achievement

Families' impact on my research participants' academic motivation and achievement was complex and, at times, contradictory. Families were both obstacle and support, motivating force and deterrent. Parents wanted their children to succeed academically and often had no idea how to support attainment of their children's educational goals. Likewise, my research participants' children were both a deeply motivating factor in their return to school and also, at times, a substantial obstacle.

Parental Support for Academic Achievement

There is great variety in the kind and quantity of support for academic achievement parents were able to offer my research participants and in the aspirations they held for their children. Some went to great lengths to instill in their children a desire for education and to make possible their academic achievement.

Some participants describe family members with high educational aspirations for them despite (or perhaps because of) having low educational levels themselves. Sandra writes in her memoir, "My grandfather had a second grade education but he was a very intelligent man. He valued education and wanted all of his children to have the opportunity to be educated."

A few of my research participants had mothers who advocated strongly for their children in schools and deeply desired for their children what they could not have – a solid education. Florence describes her mother as a fighter who "sought information on getting her children the best education available." Although her father had only a third grade education, he would bring home discarded books from his job as a porter at a private university to read and share with family. Florence's mother

was involved with the PTA at their neighborhood school and through this school involvement discovered she could get her children bused to a better resourced, predominantly white school in another neighborhood. In her memoir, Florence describes how her parents' educational aspirations shaped her own.

My parents instilled in my siblings and me that an education is something that cannot be taken from you. My parents did not have the opportunity to complete their education because of family problems but they encouraged us to go as far as we could.

Still other parents' educational ambitions for their children – while vivid and real – are tempered by the deep constraints of their class, race, and gender position. These constraints bind even what they are able to imagine for their children. Carmen is explicit in articulating these entwined educational ambitions and limitations:

Mami was a hard worker and homemaker, as well as a working adult student; she attained her Associate's degree from NYC Technical College without the moral support of my father. Although mami had a sense that a college degree could better one's financial situation, living the life of a poor, working class woman, college was not at the top of her priorities – survival was. And that is why I believe she told us, 'if you go to college.' I believe she hoped we would go to college, but she also lived the realistic difficulties many oppressed women of color face in our society: poverty, racial discrimination, and gender discrimination.

It is striking that Carmen is the only one of her four sisters to attain a Bachelor's degree.

Lisa echoes this sense of parental aspirations blunted by structural constraints that limit their ability to imagine a different educational future for their daughters.

My parents were very, very strict so education to them, because they were from the south, was very important and my mom used to say all the time, you gotta go to school, you've gotta get a good education because that's the only way you are going to get a good job. But, I also grew up in an era where women, especially Black women, you weren't prepared for an education that was going to lead you to college. You were prepared for an education that would get you a high school diploma and then you would probably get

married and have children. I don't think my mom and dad had any other goals for me other than the fact that they wanted me to do good in school and graduate from high school.

Rosa reiterates this sense of parental aspirations held back by the very real limits they saw imposed in a racist society. Rosa writes, "Our greatest education goal was to finish high school and get a white collar job. Certainly we would have fulfilled our parents' dream for us if we reached that goal, and we did."

Many of the research participants expressed a sense that while their parents valued education in the abstract, they were often unable to translate this lofty ideal into concrete support for their children's education (Mickelson, 1990). Often my research participants attributed this inability to bring values and actions into line to their parents' low educational attainment.

Challenges of Parental Support for Academic Achievement

Most commonly expressed among my research participants – often with deep regret and longing – was the sense that their parents did not know how to support their educational ambitions due to their lack of formal schooling. My research participants echoed the findings of much research on poor and working class families of color in describing parents who had no idea how to intercede in schools to the advantage of their children (Bowl, 2003; Fordham, 1993; Lareau, 2000; Lareau, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Although Ivy's Chinese immigrant parents routinely exhorted her on the importance of education (and threatened her with expulsion from their home if she did not succeed in school), she recalls with dismay their utter ignorance about life in American schools and their inability to support her as a student.

My parents didn't know anything about the educational system here. We went to Catholic school because it was safe. I have a set of older cousins, so we basically did what the Chungs did... They never went to a PTA meeting, they don't know what a PTA meeting is. I think the most glaring thing was when my cousin's daughter was applying to high school and they went on tour after tour and she asked a lot of questions and they had family discussions and in just one hour they had more discussion [about education] than I've had all my life with my parents. So [my parents] can't help... they didn't know how, it was just, you have to do better, you have to do better. Why did you only get a 95? They didn't understand what the test was about or what you are actually studying. When I went for a tour of my high school, we walked around, she had no questions, my mom. What did we look at? The bathroom. That's it.

This intense drive for education – absent any specific constructive support – backfired in Ivy's case, only serving to heighten her academic insecurities and push attainment of her parents' educational goals for her ever further out of her grasp.

Gillian reiterates this sense that she has pursued her education on her own despite her father's abstract desire for his daughter to go to school. She reports, "I didn't have any guidance or support, I use that word a lot – support. I think my father was interested in me going to school, but family just was not supportive..." She continues to describe the impact her parents' lack of school involvement had on her educational trajectory when she wound up in a mediocre, large public high school.

My whole educational process is one where I feel like everything just happened by default, there was no planning. Everything just happened to me because my parents were not really involved, never just showed up at school or anything. So, whatever happened, it was because I did it and don't know why I was doing it. I remember filling out the application in junior high school, probably on my own and I guess [comprehensive high school] was one of the schools I put on there, why I don't know and I got a letter saying I was to report to the school and that was it.

April situates her parents' inability to guide her educationally in their own limited educational experiences.

Well, my parents are not academics. My father was very hard working... and he was the type of man who worked hard and brought home the money and

my mom took care of us and then eventually my mom went out to work. But, taking care of us in their eyes meant not so much in terms of education. Taking care more of your physical needs, making sure you had what you needed, making sure you were alright and that kind of thing. That's where it ended for them.

April is resigned to the constraints their limited educational experiences place on the aspirations her parents held for her. She recalls, "My parents did not attend high school, so I think they parented from their limited experience; they couldn't give what they did not have."

Thus, April is acutely aware of the importance of teachers to intercede on students' behalf when their parents cannot. Her memoir locates the loss of influential teachers (due to budget cuts in education in the country where she grew up) as a pivotal event that undermined her academic motivation as a young adult. She pinpoints this loss of motivating teachers – in the context of her parents' limited educational knowledge – as what effectively derailed her educational ambition for several decades.

Carmen articulates a sense that her mom's limited educational aspirations for her daughters stemmed from fear rooted in culturally-based gender norms and expectations. Fear, on the part of immigrant parents, that education will lead children away from them physically, emotionally, and culturally, into unknown worlds where they would not know how to counsel and guide them is common and widespread. When presented with the opportunity to send one of her daughters away from home to an elite boarding school on a full scholarship, Carmen reflects on how her own mother limited her educational ambitions and resolves to not do the same. She says,

“...my mom did a great job, but she held us back because of fear. And I said, I can't do the same thing to my kid cause I'm afraid.”

Rosa also recalls that her parents' educational aspirations for her were defined by her parents own limited education. She writes, “My parents were not ‘school’ educated, my father could neither read nor write and my mother had only a second grade education.... Report cards were checked to ensure that we had passed but there was no encouragement to excel.”

But, some of my research participants also expressed a sense of being an anomaly within their extended families and communities precisely because of their educational aspirations and achievements. Although college attendance is not unheard of in their generations in their families, getting a college degree is not the norm for most of my research participants' extended family members. Deborah describes how unusual having gotten a Master's degree is in her extended family.

I have a niece who lives in Kentucky... I went to her graduation when she graduated from law school and she works for the Supreme Court Justice of Kentucky and now she is running for Circuit Court Judge and she has written to me and calls and each time she tells me how proud she is of her aunt because of seven children, I am the only one that finished college... and of the grandchildren, she's the only one. And there's 19 grandchildren. None of the others completed college.

A few research participants expressed a veiled sense that education separated them from their families and implicitly, perhaps, illuminated their family members' educational shortcomings exposing feelings of jealousy and resentment on the part of some family members. Phyllis is most explicit in describing this painful phenomenon which she experienced from an early age when her mother refused to help her with child care so she could attend college the first time around. Many years later, family

members still question her desire to continue in school. “Even now,” Phyllis recalls, “my family says, ‘you already have a masters degree, why are you in school again?’ So, it’s like, they don’t understand. They really don’t understand.”

Phyllis recounts how she brought her bound Master’s thesis to a family gathering, at her husband’s urging, only to watch her family members flip quickly through the pages and immediately change the conversation. To Phyllis, this was salt in the old wound of her family’s lack of support for her educational achievements, further distancing her from sharing what these accomplishments have meant. Shaw & Coleman (2000) report similar experiences of family support and conflict among the black women college students they studied.

Children’s Impact on Parents’ Educational Motivation

Certainly, for many of my research participants, children were an important motivation in returning to college, as well as a reason they had stayed away from school for so long. Children both created real obstacles to their mothers’ school attendance and provided the justification they needed to do something for themselves. For many women, further education often becomes legitimate when it is for the sake of one’s children (Horsman, 1990; Luttrell, 1997).

Rosa’s decision to attend college is linked, at least in part, to her dreams for her children. She recalls, “I felt I needed to be an example to my children. They needed to know that higher education was an attainable goal.” Nelly sees the greatest impact of her college education in enabling her to be a role model for her children and in the unprecedented degree of involvement she now has in her youngest child’s school. She says about her children, “I know I will have two college graduates.”

Florence describes in her memoir how she agreed to take care of her grandson so her daughter could continue in college, further postponing her educational dreams for the realization of her daughter's. She recalls her daughter's graduation from college with dual emotions.

[My daughter] was the first person in my family to complete their college degree... I said, now that you have completed college, I am going back to school. She encouraged me and told me that I could do it. The desire to finish what I started twenty-six years ago resurfaced.

Although Carmen's return to college was also linked to her desire for her daughters to see college as "a *when* not an *if*," being the single mom of three young children did not make it easy. In a section of her memoir entitled "Mommy's in College Now," Carmen recalls the daily challenges and guilt associated with pursuing a college degree. She writes,

Sometimes I'd feel selfish for depriving them of their regular routine on the night I was in class. The sitter preferred to watch them in her own apartment, but luckily we lived in the same building...Up we would go in the elevator, me trying to catch up on their day because I knew once we got home, it was straight to bed, they had school the next morning. However, this was a lot easier said than done. Imagine trying to listen and respond to the complaint of one sister doing this to another; or being informed by one child that she does not eat what the sitter served and was still hungry; or that tomorrow was a class trip; or that she wasn't able to finish her assignment, because she needed my help; or etc., etc., etc.

Once everyone's needs were met, and my three darlings (or monsters, depending on their behavior) were in bed, my evening continued. I usually began my assignments that same night, especially if there was a lot of reading involved.

William, a single father, also sees his college attendance as an example for his son. When his son visited for extended periods over the summer, he faced challenges in reconciling his parental responsibilities with the demands of college. Yet, William also notes the importance of children seeing their parents struggle in school.

I had to take courses in the summer... and my son was here with me and he had to go to college with me... That was one of the greatest challenges because he was young and it was difficult at times, I had to go home and prepare something for us to eat. But, again, he saw the struggle, so he was with me through a lot of it.

Both Carmen and Phyllis had to leave school, albeit temporarily, when problems with their children became too overwhelming to manage along with their studies. Parents often find themselves teetering at the fulcrum of a delicate balance as their children see-saw between being a motivation and an obstacle in their pursuit of a college education.

Children's Educational Achievement

It was not my intention to explore the educational experiences of my participants' children, yet the persistence of racism in blocking educational achievement over generations leaked through their narratives in surprising and unsettling ways. Mother's college attendance did not easily or automatically translate into greater higher education attainment among their children, perhaps because of the late age at which many of the parents attained their degrees relative to their children's educational trajectories. The educational attainment of their children was decidedly mixed and many times my research participants surpassed their own children's educational aspirations and achievements. This observation echoes Attewell's (2007) finding in his study of former female CUNY students that although a mother's educational attainment did have a positive effect on her offspring's educational success, race substantially mitigated these positive effects. The children, particularly the sons of the black women in his study, were less likely to be academically successful than either the offspring of their white or Latina peers.

Several of my research participants' children attended and graduated from a range of higher education institutions. Cumulatively, they attained one Master's, one Bachelor's, and several Associate's degrees. Three other participants had children who were considering, or had opted to go into, various branches of the military in lieu of higher education. And one participant had children who have chosen not to pursue any form of higher education. Yet, more than half of my research participants described their children's educational journeys as bumpy and incomplete, full of starts and stops, often ending prior to degree attainment. They flesh out these numbers with worrisome stories that show the intransigency of structural obstacles to educational opportunity and attainment among working class youth of color.

Deborah's aspirations for her son to attend college stem from her awareness of the challenges facing black youth.

There's so much going against them [black children]. You really have to be abreast of everything and be three steps ahead of them in orienting them to things so that when they come up against these things in school and society, you can't shelter them because they won't know how to confront these situations.

Yet, Deborah struggles with not having found the right balance between encouraging her son's academic aspirations and preparing him for the realities of a racist world.

When my son went to school...they were discussing when they went to college what they were going to be and my son said he was going to be a lawyer and the teacher said he had to pick something else because he couldn't be a lawyer [because he was black]...I sat him down and let him know there was nothing beyond his reach and his grades reflected that. Which is why I still feel bad that he didn't go to college when he got a scholarship....

When her son graduates from high school, rejects a full scholarship at an academically competitive university to enlist in the navy – a decision Deborah did not support but felt was his to make – and is honorably discharged from the military after

a nervous breakdown precipitated by his service in the Gulf war, Deborah wonders aloud whether she has done wrong in cultivating high ambitions in her son.

I think perhaps that I encouraged my son to the extent that he was overly optimistic about himself and what he could do. And when I didn't, I didn't instill in him that in spite of his optimism he would still be subjected to certain things, not only from other people, but from his country and from those that he put his greatest trust in. It's hard to teach your children about the disappointments in life, it's difficult. You don't want them to suffer the things that you suffered.

Florence's son, who left college before graduating, explicitly rejects the idea that college is sufficient to counteract the employment discrimination black men experience. She relates,

I just spoke with [my son] not too long ago and I said, you should think about going back [to college] because... he's looking for a job and he said most of the companies assume you have a college degree and he doesn't... he said, what good is it? And he used the examples of his [African American] friends, they completed their college education and they're working in fields that they didn't get their degree in. He said, they wasted their time pursuing that degree and they're working at something else. Or they had a difficult time getting a job.

Sandra reflects in her memoir on the supposed inter-generational transfer of educational achievement.

In my family, it was understood that college came after high school. No discussion. I was not the first person to get a college degree nor will I be the first with a master's degree. Others in my family had traveled that road before. Each generation was supposed to do better than the one before.

Yet, when her son is a junior in high school, Sandra is astonished, and dismayed, to discover that he does not want to attend college. In her memoir she recounts this pivotal realization.

Whenever we talked about college, it always ended with my son turning the conversation on me. He would say that if college was so important then why was I a dropout? Throwing that up in my face hurt. I couldn't let him get away with it, but it was the truth. The only alternative I had was to change it.

Determined to be an example to him, Sandra enrolled in WEP. Although her son completed three years of college himself, he never graduated and she recognizes that he went to college only because she pushed him to do so.

Although William also hoped to be a college-going role model for his son, he is considering going into the military, against William's wishes and values.

I told him in the first place, this is not a good time to go into the military, even for college credits. His way of thinking about the military is a lot different than mine was in the late 60's and early 70's because he's down in Virginia and the whole mindset is a lot different there.

Lisa is not sure higher education must necessarily be a part of her daughters' future. She remarks, "I have bright children, they're very proud of their mother's accomplishments, but they never felt they needed to follow in my footsteps. Now that may change."

While several of my research participants expressed deep disappointment and regret over their children's decisions to rebuff college, many are unaware that this most personal of decisions represents a societal trend with deep and disturbing implications for an entire generation. Yet, as explored more fully in Chapter 3, this re-assessment of the value of higher education on the part of my research participants' children is not arbitrary or irrational. In fact, many economists would say it is quite astute (Anyon, 2005; Lafer, 2002; Zweig, 2000). While their parents came of age in an era of widening opportunity for African Americans, other racial/ethnic minorities, and women, my research participants' children graduated high school into a world of increasing economic and social inequity. Their decision to decline college is a reflection of narrowing opportunity at many levels. College costs

have soared at the same time as grant-based financial aid for higher education has decreased (Bloom, 2005; Mortenson, 1990). In the tight local and global economy, the military represents one of few solid career options for working class young women and men. Furthermore, in the last decades, institutions of higher education have consistently produced a greater supply of college graduates than available middle class jobs. Increasing numbers of college graduates not only work beneath their educational qualifications, but a growing number earn close to the minimum wage (Anyon, 2005). Given that racism and sexism substantially mitigate the effects of higher educational attainment on income (Fine & Burns, 2003), my research participants' children legitimately question the value of a college degree.

Academic Achievement as Positive Resistance

While not all of my research participants wear the mantle of academic achievement easily or readily, proving to themselves and others that they could “do college” was, I believe, an essential ingredient of what kept them in school. This challenge to the roles the dominant society, and even some of their own families, prescribed for them as working class women, and men, of color represents a subtle form of resistance for many of my research participants. As Weis (1985) affirms, “collective faith in education is itself an oppositional tendency in the black community” (147).

Yet, as Valenzuela (1999) wisely cautions “‘positive resistance’ is a subjective call, depending a great deal on the eyes of the beholder” (229). Just as all oppositional behavior can't be attributed to political intent, not all academic achievement by minority students is resistance either. Yet, my research participants'

tenure in school, even when their mobility desires do not pan out, requires explanation. Many express the reasons they stayed in college in personal terms – leaps in self-confidence and self-esteem, a willingness to speak up and be heard, the fulfillment of a long-held dream. I pose the possibility that these transformations in subjectivity represent a form of positive resistance for students for whom college attendance is anything but the norm.

I also want to conjecture that this sense of academic achievement as a means of resistance develops, in part, because WEP both exposes many students to critical and nuanced views of social structures and institutions – sometimes for the first time – as it encourages their academic achievement. Rather than positioning achievement and critique as poles, the WEP curriculum and pedagogy, at its best, engages students in seeing them as entwined. Less tangible, but as crucial as tuition reimbursement or evening class hours to their academic success, was the opportunity WEP offered students to make critique and achievement mutually reinforcing elements of their college experience.

Certainly, students' life histories set the stage for this understanding of their academic achievement as well. Most WEP students bring rich life experiences and a familiarity with struggle to their studies (O'Connor, 1997). Their lifelong educational journeys, expressed beautifully in the memoirs, reflect parallel narratives of academic achievement and evolving critical consciousness that allow them to retain their high achievement orientation while articulating a keen awareness of how race, class, and gender operate in society.

Finally, positive resistance that embraces academic achievement is ultimately more hopeful than the opposition to schooling copiously documented in the ethnographic literature (Fine, 1991; MacLeod, 1995; Weis, 1985; Willis, 1977). Unlike a narrow conception of resistance, this view does not circumscribe human agency only to the negative or oppositional, consigning students with a critique of schools and other social structures to reproducing their own marginal social and economic status. I hope the experiences of my research participants illustrate how academic achievement can be a creative means for students to exert their agency in response to oppressive structural forces (Mehan et al, 1994; 1996).

Chapter 5

“A place where we receive equal treatment”

Care and the Worker Education Program

Every student I have interviewed so far has attributed the student-friendly, working adult environment of WEP to be part of what made his/her return to college less painful, traumatic, threatening. I knew this and expected it. But, I think I am finding something else under their descriptions of the WEP – that it is a comfortable environment for (some) students, not just because the other students are adults, or working, or women, or mothers. Not just because the teachers are friendly and supportive and understanding of the obstacles adult students face, not just that it is small and easy to navigate, and everyone is on a first name basis. But, I think part of what students are saying is that this is a safe and comfortable place in which to be a black student. (Field note, 2/9/04)

Given the often hostile environment of higher education for working class students of color, one of the most salient of my findings is that my research participants overwhelmingly experience WEP as a caring educational space and attribute their academic success, in some part, to the ethos of care that permeates the program.

Nel Noddings (1984; 1992), the pioneer in caring theory, has made important contributions to the field of education with her notion of “ethical” caring as the foundation of educational practice. She posits that caring is essentially relational and human and that teachers, as individuals, must care in accordance with their moral commitment to each student. Noddings (1984) eschews the organization of schooling around academic disciplines and poses important questions about what schools would look like if they operated under an ethic of care. Her answer, in part, describes WEP – a small school with small classes, teachers working with students over time, teachers who function as counselors and advisors as well as educators, and pedagogy centered on cooperative learning methods rather than those that stress competition.

Many scholars build upon Noddings' seminal work, revealing both the limitations and complexities in her theory of care. Valenzuela (1999) situates Noddings' ideas within inequitable educational contexts in which race, ethnicity, and social class define how care or its lack are enacted in schools. Other scholars have explored how theories of care interact with inequitable social structures in terms of the impossibility of enacting an ethic of care in many existing educational spaces (Eaker-Rich & Van Galen, 1996). Still others have complicated notions of care by examining how the theories are lived out in schools, by real teachers whose experiences belie theory showing that care can be filled with contradictions, the lines between helping and enabling, challenging and hindering students often quite blurry in practice (Prillaman, 1994). Other examples from educational practice challenge the dichotomy Noddings creates between academics and care, highlighting teachers who believe academic rigor and high expectations – and the supports students need to reach them – are important means of enacting ethical caring (Prillaman, 1994; Wasley et al, 1997). Finally, other scholars attempt to link theoretically notions of justice and care, by exploring how care – when enacted in the form of high academic expectations and rigor – is inextricably linked to justice in educational outcomes (Walker, 1996; Walker & Snarey, 2004; Wasley et al, 1997). Many of these complexities, and contradictions, are reflected in my own data and begin to suggest that, as Van Galen (1993) says, care may not be enough.

Nevertheless, my findings underscore the fact that care *is* important to adult students. My research participants believe that the care they received at WEP was an essential part of what enabled them to move towards degree completion and a critical

ingredient in the satisfaction they derived from their college experience. Thus, in this chapter, I explore the positive side of care at WEP and consider how it is manifested through intentional program (re)structuring, curricular and pedagogical choices, and staff and faculty commitment to respect and compassion for adult worker students. While fully cognizant of the limitations of care, I stress the value a caring educational experience had in the trajectories of my student research participants whose memoirs reveal how deeply uncared for so many of them were in other schools.

Access and Opportunity as Care

As a program specifically designed to meet the needs of adult learners, students receive multiple supports from WEP staff and faculty from their initial contact with the program through graduation. The deep trepidation about entering college that many of my research participants experienced was eased, in part, by the smooth and supported admissions and registration process at WEP. In great contrast to the “shock and anxiety” many adult students’ experience upon their (re)entry into higher education (Bowl, 2003), my research participants describe their initial contacts with the program as supportive and welcoming. This positive first impression of WEP seems pivotal in bringing some adult students into school.

Although a college education was a passionately held, and deeply buried, desire for many of my research participants, the stories of their entry into WEP revealed a surprising tentativeness to their college enrollment and the steadfastness of WEP’s admissions personnel seemed key to their perseverance. William, like others, recounts his entry into WEP as both fortuitous and vulnerable to potential obstacles.

He recalls teetering on the edge of renouncing his dream of college, any complication in the admissions process a deterrent to this long awaited and much feared beginning.

So many years passed, I thought [college] was a pipe dream, but I remember [the person in charge of admissions at WEP] made it so easy for me. I'll never forget because I became aggravated. They said I had to do this and I had to get a money order. So, it was just a number of things and I said, maybe I am not meant to return to school at this time and she just, she was very calm and patient with me and it helped, it helped get me into school. If she had been short of patience that day, I probably would have just walked away and forgotten about it.

Gillian confirms that her encounter with WEP was random, a case of being in the right place at the right time. Her ability to realize her latent desire to continue her education was made possible by the ease of enrollment at WEP.

I had just started working at [city agency] and a WEP staff person came to the job site. I was meeting my sister in front of the building and she was giving out these yellow flyers. And I took it. It was one of those things I put down and I was talking to another co-worker who was sitting next to me and she said we should go. I went to an open house and it was just so easy, they made it so easy to enroll. But, before that point I had in mind that this was something I wanted to do.

Florence simply says, "I could not believe how smoothly the entire process went... the whole registration process took a good fifteen minutes." This was in great contrast to her experiences in a large public college where registering for classes was a whole day affair that involved waiting on long and time-consuming lines.

The availability of financial assistance is a key institutional support at WEP and was pivotal to my research participants' (re)entry into college, as well. The enticement of the 24 tuition-free credits one union offers its members was a refrain that repeated itself over and over in students' narratives. Sandra underscores the significance of this aid in her memoir. She writes,

My opportunity to set things straight came in the mail one day. My union local was sponsoring an adult education program that offered 24 tuition free credits toward an undergraduate degree. It was a chance of a lifetime and right on time... At this point, it did not matter what the majors were. Free was free.

William, Rosa, and Deborah concur that the union's generous tuition reimbursement spurred them to finally (re)apply to college. William remarks, "They [the union] were willing to pay for twenty-four tuition free credits and I guess that was really a motivating factor."

The multiple ways in which WEP facilitates the brass tacks of college access are of utmost importance to working adults who are juggling many competing roles and responsibilities. Samuel, like many others, expresses the importance of a program that is designed to accommodate adult lives.

...first and foremost I think this is a program that is catered, or designed for the adult learner and it tries to make it easier for adults to participate. I think for adults who have children or jobs or whatever is going on in their lives, to be going to school two or three nights a week on one class [is hard] and here in this program you can take one class one night a week and that makes it very appealing. I think that's a tremendous advantage.

Several of my research participants mentioned the importance of WEP's willingness to be flexible with students and help prevent adult lives and difficulties from getting in the way of school. When Brenda had to miss class due to illness she was surprised, and grateful, for the accommodations staff and faculty made for her. She recalls in her memoir,

My instructor was indeed a great help to me. She mailed all the exercises which I had missed and in a personal note encouraged me to continue to do well on my assignments. These encouraging words boosted my ego and prompted me to return to classes even sooner than I had planned.

Later, when Brenda encounters another medical problem that will necessitate surgery and is urged by her doctor to withdraw for the semester, she writes, "this news

shattered every nerve in my body.” Brenda is devastated that she will have to leave college, and elated when she hears that her WEP advisor and professors will assist her in making arrangements so that she can continue to take one class.

The director of worker education at the college highlights the centrality of access to the mission of WEP. He argues that the heart of the mission of worker education is making college accessible to working adults (in terms of location and scheduling of classes) and in getting unions to provide financial support for higher education for their members.

Support Not Shame: Importance of an Adult College Environment

Echoing through my research participants’ narratives was the importance of a college designed specifically and exclusively for working adults. Often this reflected their shame about past educational failures and fear about embarking on college after so many years out of school. Adair’s (2005) study of adult students (who had been welfare recipients) in a traditional private college revealed that over 60% had felt “shamed, worthless and invisible in their classrooms” (p. 13).

Sandra, like several of my research participants, admits that her return to college was tinged with shame over her previous failure and is grateful for the non-judgmental support WEP staff offered her in returning to school. In her memoir she writes,

I have always been embarrassed about my past failure in college even though it was a long time ago. But when I went to WEP, I was never made to feel less of a person because I had messed up when I was younger. I was always given encouraging words. I was told to leave the past in the past and to look to the future.

As second-chance students, fear and trepidation in starting college were high for many of my research participants. The adults-only, supportive environment of WEP seemed to ameliorate these feelings to some degree. Nelly explains,

...it's a mature environment. It's working people so you don't have to worry, most people the biggest fear about coming back to school is sitting in a classroom with a bunch of teenagers... but it's not like that here."

Lisa reflects on her decision to attend WEP, as opposed to another college, and recalls that being among other adult students helped to lessen her fears.

It was such a nurturing environment that when people would ask me about WEP and why I chose to go there I would say, it's for older adults who are going back to school after being out of school for a very long time. And we were all very frightened, but the moment you walked inside these halls and sat in those classrooms, you were not scared anymore...

Nelly describes the isolation she felt when she attended college as a young woman and was one of few working students. She highlights the importance of sharing a similar background with her classmates and being able to identify with them and their struggles as full-time workers and students.

When I started at [other college]... I was just going to school there and leaving and going to work... I think once I came here it was more than a family environment, that was the big difference. People in your same age group, coming more or less from the same background a lot of us and working with the city. That's a lot in common ... having somebody else you can identify with. When I was at [other college] no one could identify with me working full-time and going to school full-time. That is totally unheard of and people were like, why? I was like, well I got a job paying money, that was something that made a difference."

Even when students could not articulate precisely what it was about WEP that attracted and nurtured them, they knew it was different than what they had feared and expected from college – and/or previously experienced and fled – and this difference was a crucial part of what enabled them to work towards their degrees. Lisa says, "I

just liked the atmosphere... I just felt very comfortable, so I said, well, this may be the school that I will go to.”

Class, Race, and Gender Comfort

Often implicit in students’ narration of WEP as a caring space is that, in addition to being a program designed for working adults, it is also a positive educational environment for them as women, and men, of color. This is significant given their previous, often negative, experiences in urban schools, as explored in chapter 4. Sandra reveals how comfort, based on race, gender, and class is imbedded in many of my research participants’ conception of WEP as a caring educational space.

The staff is friendly and very receptive to the students’ needs. They treat you with respect and generally care about the work they do. The environment is conducive to our learning. Sometimes students questioned why things are so different at this school from other schools we attended. I think it’s because we are used to biased environments where we aren’t treated fairly and this is a place where we receive equal treatment. This type of setting is not prevalent in our everyday life. These ingredients set WEP apart from other worker education programs.

The predominantly black student body helped many of my research participants to feel at home in college. Florence expresses simply what many of my research participants implied, “being among students like myself helped tremendously.” This view is substantiated by research that asserts that “on historically Black campuses, Black students emphasize feelings of engagement, connection, acceptance, and extensive support and encouragement” (Allen qtd. in Tatum, p. 79, 1997).

Rosa, who had previously attended a Puerto Rican college where she got her AA degree many years before, described how the working adult environment allowed

her to leave the comfort of her ethnic group and still feel a sense of commonality and community – based on age, employment status, gender, and class – with her classmates. In her memoir she wrote,

WEP felt comfortable. I was once again among peers, in a culture of adult workers... I had gone beyond my ethnic community into a community of adult, civil service workers, confirming my belief that I do well when I am in comfortable surroundings.

Ivy, one of few Asian students in WEP, is also substantially younger than most of her classmates and unique in that she is single and has no children. Her comfort at WEP is based on a sense of solidarity she feels with other adult students who have overcome adversity to pursue their degrees. She writes about WEP, “I finally found a place where I feel comfortable. I understand the students and I am understood.”

Small Program and Class Size

Small program and class size were mentioned by many of my research participants – students, staff, and faculty alike – as important to creating and sustaining this caring environment. Quite unlike many urban public colleges, program and class size are consistently small at WEP. In the half-decade prior to completing my research (1999 – 2003), the total number of undergraduates enrolled in WEP averaged about 100 each semester. While all undergraduate classes are capped at twenty five students, in the fall 2004 semester, five of the courses offered to undergraduates averaged fewer than fifteen students each. Thus, WEP offers newly returned adult students both an intimate program and small class size. Much educational research has documented the importance of small school and class size to student satisfaction and achievement. Initiatives to establish small secondary schools are a central part of New York City’s current educational reform efforts precisely

because of the benefits they offer educationally disadvantaged students (Wasley et al, 2000). WEP is in the enviable position of providing public university students a small school experience at the postsecondary level.

Many of my research participants remarked on the ways in which smallness facilitated their educational experiences at WEP. Deborah says, “It’s a smaller group, a more intimate group, and you get the understanding and the one-on-one attention that you need. I think you really can get that here.” Another research participant, Ivy, who has attended no less than four colleges while pursuing her undergraduate degree, was initially surprised to be known by her instructors and classmates at WEP. She remarks,

...it’s a small place and people know you. The director knows me, I am not just a number. I don’t feel like that on the college main campus which I call the vast cultural wasteland... Here, students will pass me on the street and they’ll know my name...

April underscores the importance of this sense of community and how being known by staff and faculty validate her efforts in college.

WEP is very much geared to giving adult workers a second chance and a very good education. It meets their needs, like one student said to me last fall, she has been to two colleges before and this is the only college she has gone to where workers remember her name and know who she is and what class she is in. And I think adult workers need that kind of support so they are not just a number in a crowd or a social security number on a piece of paper. It makes you feel important. It makes you feel that you are doing something worthwhile and people do care.

The former director of WEP agrees that the small size of the program and classes and the lack of anonymity are key to students’ ability to succeed at WEP.

The recent movement towards developing learning communities in many large colleges and universities mimics what often happens naturally for students at

WEP (Jaffee, 2004). Like deliberately restructured learning communities, WEP's small size and limited curriculum cultivates a strong sense of community among classmates, encourages contact with faculty both in and out of class, and tends to deepen intellectual connections between courses and disciplines. Small class and program size allowed students, staff, and faculty to break down some of the obstacles to community and connection prevalent in the large urban institutions of higher education many of my research participants had previously attended.

Classmates as Supports

Many of my research participants cited their classmates as a source of significant support towards completing their degrees. Given its small size, WEP functions as a de facto learning community with students advancing towards graduation as a cohort, developing intimate and lasting friendships over the many years it takes most WEP students to earn their degrees. It has been well documented that peer support is key to persistence in college, especially for first generation college students, like my research participants, who may not have support for their degree aspirations among family or non-school friends (Hummel & Steele, 1996; Treisman, 1992).

Sandra depicts a group of classmates that started their college journeys together and graduated together, a number of whom even began their masters in WEP at the same time. Gillian describes the importance of her classmates to her college experience, both in terms of the brass tacks help, and the intellectual community, they afforded her. She says,

My classmates, my classmates were my biggest supports [in completing college], getting the work for me if I'm not there, putting it in my box, wanting to talk about it after class, definitely my classmates.

William, when queried about who or what has supported him through college, says,

I would have to say my classmates. We started together, we tried to support one another when we started to waver... We did a lot of the projects that require field work together such as science. Going out at 7 am to count barnacles – I don't know if I didn't have someone with me if I would have made it up there. That's just one example, but it helped to have someone.

WEP Staff

WEP staff, though few in number and often overburdened by the administrative details of their jobs, are held in high esteem by many of my research participants. Nelly echoes many of her classmates when she says,

...the staff, they're very, very personal. You can approach any of them and speak to them about different situations. They're always listening and giving positive feedback.

Brenda agrees that the support the staff provides students is both unique and critical to their persisting in college.

Here I don't think students drop out because of [lack of] support. Maybe because of the financial expense, but here we get the support from staff and teachers. It is very, very personal and unique.

Sandra recalls a specific incident that illustrates the dedication and attentiveness of the staff to each individual student.

One counselor actually paid a fee I was unaware of to make sure that my registration went in on time. This goes beyond the call of duty but shows how committed people are at what they do. They really nurture and encourage students to succeed.

A former WEP program director was very much involved in the day-to-day solving of student problems and issues as a matter of course. This was a conscious

decision on her part to be open and accessible to students. She explains her commitment to candid and equitable relationships with students.

I try to be out there, to have my door open and sometimes in my desire to be accessible and non-hierarchical, it gives me more work. From the time I began [at WEP] there have been students who will call me up about some item, with the registrar or something, that could be handled by someone else. But, I think it's a lot about accessibility and trying to emphasize openness. I think it's partly about my politics and being a white woman in this job not wanting to stand on ceremony...

William fondly recalls another former WEP director who greatly inspired him. "He had so much energy and drive and he was so committed," he reminisces, "he really had an impact on me and I think on a lot of people coming here."

While students mention all staff as caring and supportive, Caroline, a West Indian former student who is now an academic advisor and counselor in the program, stands out as the face of caring at WEP. She is mentioned over and over again by students as the one person who kept them on the path towards degree completion when obstacles to their persistence in college seemed insurmountable. Caroline serves as both a role model and mentor to many students and uses her unique understanding of the challenges WEP students face to support them in attaining their degrees. She is extremely dedicated to the students and the program, working long hours, and dealing with many of the day-to-day petty and time consuming operational aspects of the program that are essential to facilitating students' progress towards their degrees. Caroline was a parent member of the School Leadership Team at her daughter's school, a new small high school in Harlem. She makes a conscious parallel between her daughter's experience in this small, caring high school where the principal knew

every student's name and her work at WEP. She seems to effortlessly model this ethic of care in her own relationships with students.

Deborah, who went on to get a Masters degree at WEP, recalls,

Towards the end of the BA things were going on [in my life] and I came to a point where I said, "I'm going to give this up"... But, I didn't because there was a wonderful person sitting out front named Caroline. She sat me down one day and when we finished talking I said, 'I've made it this far I'm going to keep going.' I really owe that to her. Because I had come to my wits end at that point. I'm glad that I stayed.

I am grateful to Caroline who is the only person with whom I shared some of that which I was experiencing [around my son]. Caroline encouraged me when I was about to leave school because the stress seemed to be too much.

April was moved to tears when she spoke about the support Caroline had offered her during her college experience.

The biggest support I have had in this whole college journey is Caroline. [April starts to cry.] The biggest support I have is Caroline. She has been there in every area and still continues to be there... She has been... I can't tell you, I can't begin to tell you.

A word that surfaces often in Caroline's description of her work is *pushing* – pushing students to apply to the program, to seek financial aid, to register for classes, to call their union benefits office to determine what support they might be entitled to.

Pushing, prodding, coaxing and cajoling students to do whatever they need to do to move towards attaining their degrees is, in her mind, synonymous with caring.

Caroline's role in WEP highlights the importance of staff and faculty who share non-traditional college students' backgrounds and experiences and serve as an important link to the often alien and alienating world of higher education.

The 1999 evaluation report commissioned by the program questions whether the support the WEP staff offers students may, at times, err on the side of fostering

dependence. Rather than empowering students to advocate for themselves, the report suggests that staff may do for students what they ought to be taught to do themselves. None of my research participants explicitly echoed this sentiment, although several of the faculty implied that this may occur. I explore the contradictions of care at WEP more fully in chapter 6.

WEP Faculty

Many of my research participants mentioned individual faculty members by name in their memoirs and interviews in public recognition of the care and support they received from them. Several expressed admiration and affection towards their teachers and gratitude for the learning they'd done in their classes.

Lisa explains the importance of relationships with faculty to her intellectual development and her ability to progress towards her degree.

One of the things that kept me at WEP and why I think I thrived so well there was that all of the professors were kind and compassionate people. I didn't feel pressured. I felt that any time I needed help, there was always somebody there... I never had anybody ever say, oh Lisa, we don't have time for you. Or we don't know what you can do with that. There was always an open arm, open hand, someone to talk to, instructions, tutoring... No one ever hesitated to say, what can we do to help? And I'm not sure that happens everywhere. I've heard other people who have gone to other colleges and when I tell them my experience, they're like, we didn't get that and we didn't get the hand holding. It was just a family oriented environment...

Sandra simply says about her teachers, "Some of the faculty are the epitome of what educators should be."

Many of my research participants were pleased to discover that most WEP instructors recognize that they are responsible adults and treat them accordingly.

Phyllis says, "The teachers, they don't treat you like you're a child. They're like, okay, you're here, you're an adult, you're responsible." Carmen concurs, "Most of

the professors are on a first name basis, so there's not that professor-student type of thing.”

Samuel describes how he has learned to take advantage of the WEP faculty's openness to students to ensure his own learning. He is aware that most WEP instructors respond positively to his proactive approach to being a student.

I haven't had a bad relationship with any teacher... when I don't understand I just say, do you need this? Or, can I get your email so I can, you know. I found it to be a great experience. I am just sorry that it is ending. Because I enjoy this environment. I enjoy being in an environment where people are exchanging ideas and the kind of dialogue we have in this setting is a little different than what you have sometimes out there.

Sandra explains how the relationships she made with faculty extended outside of class and deepened the learning she was doing in courses.

I like WEP because it is small and personal... I developed relationships outside of school with some of the faculty because of our shared interest in reparations and labor issues.

Several other research participants mentioned volunteering in community organizations that adjunct faculty were affiliated with, attending rallies with faculty for causes they both supported, and becoming active in the same political party as their instructor, as examples of the unusual and important relationships that developed between students, faculty, and staff in this small adult program.

Pedagogy as Care

Many of my student research participants commented on the unconventional pedagogy employed by some instructors at WEP and connected the participatory, engaged learning promoted at WEP with its ethos of care. Many described classes in which student participation was a key feature, in which they felt supported in finding their own voices and opinions. This commitment to dialogue, to allowing student

voices to emerge, is evident in my research participants' descriptions of their classroom experiences at WEP. In her memoir, Carmen illustrates the importance of participation and dialogue to her learning.

I can't imagine taking a conventional lecture hall course, like the ones I've seen in movies: a multitude of droopy-eyed students in a daze listening to the continual droning of a pontificating professor perched at the podium. If I had to sit in one of those types of classes – after having experienced the freedom of discussion and debate we have at WEP – I honestly think I would bust a gut trying to contain my voice.... For me, class discussion is the best part of the course. That is when both professor and students can share their points of view and learn from each other.

Ivy, in reflecting upon her first semester at WEP, explains how shocked she was to experience the participatory pedagogy that challenged her prior notion of obedience and silence as the correct way to comport herself in classrooms.

I was dumbfounded by just how different the class structure is from my previous learning experience... No longer could I just sit there and remain silent... I am usually known as the diligent and obedient student and was encouraged to remain so for I was rewarded for this type of behavior... I came to equate silence as correct, the right way of handling myself... I am finally beginning to realize just how empowering expressing myself can be.

Ivy elaborates on what this pedagogy meant to her, recognizing that, "It was the first time I felt like I was allowed to disagree."

Rosa, an older adult student, also comments on the relaxed and open climate of most WEP classrooms and how this enabled her to feel comfortable and confident as a learner.

This time around, I was older than most of the professors, yet the climate of give and take, the element that students brought life experience to the classroom, made it a comfortable and rewarding atmosphere... WEP was non-traditional... it felt like a community coming together to learn. The professors were easy to speak with and you never felt as though you were being judged on your intellectual capacity, but rather than everything spoken had value.

Other research participants remarked upon the faculty's efforts to stress collaboration over competition as an important feature of the caring pedagogy of WEP. Lisa explains,

I don't think there was no real kind of rivalry amongst one another. But, people were just very smart and you went to class with very, very smart people and a lot of times some of them didn't realize how smart they were because they never had done it before, but here in this nurturing environment, you get an opportunity and it all comes back to you.

Samuel describes his original trepidation, and ultimate satisfaction, with a group project he did for one class (for which they received an A+). He articulates his initial resistance to collaborative learning, common among many WEP students, as group goals bump up against conventional, individual conceptions of academic success or failure.

And the thing that I found most rewarding out of it, I mean forget the grade and stuff like that, but the fact that going into this assignment I was a little skeptical about working with teams. I am used to doing things on my own, 'cause sometimes you get people who don't want to do this and pushing people, I didn't enjoy that. But, what I came to realize is that there was an energy I fed off of because there were quite a few that really got involved and that energy kind of gave me the push to go that extra mile, so it was fun.

A staff person reflects on the ways in which respect for adult learners changes the pedagogy and curriculum in many of the classes at WEP to ones in which knowledge is collectively debated and constructed rather than imparted by experts.

...you come here into an environment where people respect who you are and the teachers respect who you are, so there's not the traditional learning engagement that many of you had, it's interactive, you inform, you bring experiences.

Many WEP instructors, like the "politically relevant teachers" Beauboeuf (1997) studied, "share an understanding of [how] systemic inequity" limits the opportunities of students of color and they express their "commitment to taking

personal responsibility for making society more equitable” through their teaching (p. 13). This commitment is exemplified through pedagogical choices and in the prominent role social justice issues play in the urban and labor studies curriculum.

Ivy describes how her sense of comfort in the program is ideological, grounded in shared values and politics she had found no where else in her life.

I feel very much at ease in this particular program because it reinforces what I feel as a person that I wasn't getting in other areas of my life...a lot of things I have been silent about, that's changed. I want to be expressive about it. And I feel like being at a rally, a march can make a difference.”

Ivy is unique in linking the program curriculum and pedagogy to a broad conception of care, not just for students, but learning to care about the world. In her memoir, she writes,

At WEP the students are urban studies and/or labor studies majors who are actual residents who live and work in the city...The events transpiring in the city are not mere hypothetical situations but concrete occurrences that every student must deal with on a day-to-day basis. People here unfortunately know exactly of the dire consequences of a failing school system, a disappearing welfare program, and the loss of jobs in urban areas and they are not happy. But, the fact that they are in this program makes me optimistic again. There are still people out there who *care*, who create solutions, and aren't merely paying lip service to these difficult problems.

Although the importance of caring *about* rather than caring *for* is minimized in Noddings' (1984; 1992) theory of care in schools, it is highly relevant at WEP. Ivy's expansive view of WEP's ethic of care fuses the program's commitment to educational opportunity and equity for working adult students with a broad conception of social justice. In Ivy's mind, to care for students such as these is to care about changing the world.

Caring About Rigor

Those research participants who defined rigor as an essential component of care in education were pivotal in exposing the limits of care at WEP. Their aims, and concerns, begin to reveal the tension inherent in maintaining high academic standards in a program that places a premium on support and compassion for adult learners.

Several of the faculty who participated in my research made explicit links between their conception of care in education and their desire to be academically rigorous. To care about rigor, for these participants, was to care deeply for students and educational equity. One staff person explains that from her initial contact with students she links the idea of care and academic rigor, promising them, “This is a place that cares so deeply about you that you are not going to walk out of here with just content... But, you are really going to be able to read and write.”

An instructor underscores the relationship between care and rigor, specifically for students of color who have been denied equitable educational opportunities in the past. He argues that an honest assessment of students’ academic abilities and a demand for true rigor is the foundation of caring. But, implicit in this instructor’s definition of care is a critique of other faculty members who may confuse leniency with care, compromising student learning in the process. He explains,

[I am] rigorous and demanding because I am very honest with them and I will tell them... you don’t know how to write. How did that happen? If you come from a good school, you should have a good education. And, don’t forget that I am black and most of the students are black, we are unified in oppression that black people have encountered... So I will tell them, some people let you pass... sometimes they have been passed by people who did not really care about them. And I am rigorous because I really do care...

This instructor reiterates the connection between high expectations and care modeled in segregated black schools, affirming rigor as an expression of care (Alder, 2002; Walker, 1996). This instructor seems to believe that “it is the absence of high expectations, not their presence, that signals a lapse in genuine caring” (Wasley et al, p. 78, 1997). The crucial, and complicated, link between rigor and care at WEP will be more fully explored in Chapter 6.

Critical Care

As my student research participants demonstrate, care *is* an important ingredient in non-traditional students’ success and satisfaction in higher education. This valuable finding ought to be considered by the many large institutions of higher education that are struggling to serve increasing numbers of non-traditional students well. Yet, liberal theories of care, grounded in Noddings’ work, have serious limitations which become evident as we explore the underside of care at WEP in chapter 6.

Noddings (1992) challenges the notion that intellectual rigor should be the central mission of schools and argues that students’ moral development ought to be the core of the educational enterprise. While a laudatory goal perhaps, it is fundamentally at odds with many of my research participants’ motivations and objectives in attending college. Although they cherished the care they received at WEP, they embarked on higher education in pursuit of intellectual development and upward mobility, as explored in Chapters 3 & 4. For them, care was a vehicle and an asset in their educations, not an end in itself.

Woven within and around my research participants' expressions of gratitude for the care they received at WEP was an unsettling worry. Several hinted that, as Van Galen (1993) discovered in her study of care at a Catholic school, "their warm and nurturing school is, nonetheless, still an institution that collaborates in the socialization of students to social roles differentiated by race, social class, and gender" (p.7). Specifically, they questioned the ways in which care, as enacted at WEP, may hinder students from achieving their goals, by diminishing the academic rigor of the program. These participants understood that what it means to care and how caring is enacted "hover at the edges of the borders of race and class" (Webb et al, p. 37, 1993) and are implicated in unequal educational outcomes.

These findings urge us towards a critical theory of care that is "grounded in a historical and political understanding of the circumstances and conditions faced by minority communities" (Rolon-Dow, p. 104, 2005) and is powerful enough to address racial inequality. Such a critical theory of care acknowledges that "schools too often replay the racial and economic biases of the larger society" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 74) and recognizes the devastating impact these larger forces can have on relationships between teachers and students. Acknowledging that individual acts of caring by teachers are not enough, a critical theory of care seeks to account for the structural, as well as the interpersonal, factors that influence school success (Rolon-Dow, 2005) and move us towards a notion of care that is intimately linked to work for social justice (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Rolon-Dow, 2005; Thompson, 1998; Webb et al, 1993). As several of my research participants so poignantly expressed, to care for them as students is to care about changing an inequitable world.

Specifically, I argue in the following chapter that to enact a critical theory of care at the WEP, we must challenge the dichotomy Noddings (1984; 1992; 2005) creates between academics and care, explicitly linking high academic expectations and rigor to equity in educational outcomes (Alder, 2002; Prillaman, 1994; Walker, 1996; Wasley et al, 1997). Care must be an expression of commitment to social justice, as it was in southern segregated schools where “to care intensely for students...was to provide them with a storehouse of tools for challenging and thwarting a deeply imbedded system of inequality” (Walker & Snarey, p. 91, 2004). WEP must emulate this ethic of care, by providing students a rigorous education that enables them to reach “their highest potential” (Walker, 1996) and their own educational goals.

Chapter 6

“In the real world no one drops their standards for you”

Academic Rigor and the Worker Education Program

When they graduate I want them to feel, ‘I went through a real thing, not an approximation of college, but I went through college and that means something!’ (WEP instructor)

Alongside descriptions of WEP as a caring educational program emerged a troubling parallel narrative about the lack of academic rigor in the program and questions as to whether or not the program could truly be a caring educational space if students were not receiving the most rigorous education possible. The research participants who worried aloud with me about WEP’s academic standards framed rigor as an issue of educational equity for working class students of color who had been disserved by their prior educations. They shared their concerns precisely because they are deeply convinced that WEP, with greater resources and clearer will, could do better by its students.

The dilemma of rigor is certainly not unique to WEP, but is shared by most public, and many private, institutions of higher education. The issues I explore in this chapter are a local manifestation of a national dilemma and are evident in the plethora of initiatives aimed at defining, and raising, college level standards in a wide variety of institutions of higher education (Abraham, 1986; Arenson, 2006; Hickok, 2006; Sullivan, 2003; NYT editorial, 2/26/06). They are manifest in the upsurge of proposals intended to “revitalize” undergraduate education throughout the United States (Gregorian, 2004; Queens College/CUNY, 2004). And they are present in the implementation of policies that limit college access at large public institutions like the

City University of New York, which, in 1999, raised admissions criteria and eliminated remediation at its four year colleges, imposed new standardized entrance exams, and instituted a “junior rising”/community college graduation exam (Arenson, 1998, 1999; McCormack, 2005).

These trends reflect the dilemma of widening college access for those traditionally excluded from higher education without a concomitant re-thinking and re-structuring on the part of the colleges and universities they attend (Chajet, 2006; Harris & Nettles, 1996; Hurtado, 2002; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1997). They further illuminate the contradiction, explored in chapter 3, of positioning higher education as the only route for mobility in our society without confronting the academic needs and challenges an influx of diverse groups of college students present to these institutions (Rendon, 1992; Rendon & Hope, 1996; Swail, 2003; Zwerling & London, 1992).

Debates about academic rigor in higher education emerge out of the national controversy over standards at the elementary and secondary levels, a debate that has been hijacked by conservatives through the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. NCLB, and the so-called standards movement, set the political and social parameters for discussions of academic rigor, promoting policies that simply raise the bar on students, and schools, while providing absolutely no additional resources to meet them (Hickok, 2006; Meier & Wood, 2004). In this chapter, I hope to show how crucial adequate *resources* are to attaining high academic rigor for academically under-prepared students.

Further, I argue that how we respond as a society to questions of academic rigor in our schools and colleges is *not* a foregone conclusion. Limiting access,

imposing standardized tests, and enforcing punitive measures a la NCLB is only one possible response to concern over academic rigor – one that, unfortunately, serves particular political, not educational, ends (McCormack, 2005). No one at WEP advocates a conception of rigor that involves external accountability to standardized measures of achievement, with the exclusion of certain students as the logical corollary of that approach. My research participants clearly reject calls for rigor that limit educational access and opportunity for non-traditional students. Rather, they advocate a conception of rigor that involves deep, critical, inquiry-based learning and sufficient scaffolding for all students to reach high standards. They argue passionately for the supports and resources necessary to make rigor an attainable goal for all WEP students, and to make WEP a model program for delivering intellectually rigorous college education to students who are academically under-prepared.

None of my research participants – least of all those most concerned about insufficient rigor at WEP – have simple answers to the complex question of how to provide academically under-prepared students with a rigorous college education. Nevertheless, they believe deeply in WEP’s social justice mission and argue that commitment to educational equity involves more than access to an academic credential. Their critique of rigor at WEP emanates from a deep desire to provide all students a substantive college experience that enriches and stretches them intellectually and provides them the tools they need to thrive in competitive work and academic settings. Like the African-American educators who served their communities in segregated southern schools, several of my participants were quick to link their conceptions of care to calls for rigor (Morris & Morris, 2002; Walker, 1996;

Walker & Snarey, 2004). They, too, understood the importance of education to prepare WEP students to stay afloat in a world stacked against them.

Open debate about the challenges to rigor at WEP will hopefully serve to spark our imaginations and engage us in creative debate over other possible options for improving the vitality of our schools. Achieving academic rigor for non-traditional, academically under-prepared students *is* a complex and challenging goal – one that requires both substantial restructuring of the educational experience and exceptional resources – but, it is a goal that is within reach. And if possible anywhere, it ought to be possible at WEP with its mission of educational opportunity for working adult students, its unique and talented instructors, and its compassionate and committed staff.

In this chapter I hope to portray the dilemmas of rigor at WEP in their full complexity. I explore this issue through the eyes and experiences of my research participants, considering how students' lack of academic preparation intersects with teachers' and students' expectations to impact on academic rigor at WEP. I consider the role of race, class, and gender in determining academic expectations and outcomes and highlight the crucial role of institutional constraints, including allocation of resources, to implementing rigorous education for academically under-prepared students. Finally, I warn against the danger of dichotomizing care and rigor and argue for high academic standards as integral to the social justice mission of WEP.

Student Perspectives on Academic Rigor

My student research participants' perspectives on the academic standards at WEP are decidedly mixed. Yet, the first inkling of unease over the program's academic rigor was starkly revealed in an interview with Gillian, who expressed concern about her college education at WEP.

I felt like it wasn't challenging enough. I felt like I wasn't learning enough, the classes were a little too easy and if I wanted to do graduate studies after this, I was worried I wouldn't be prepared.

Florence, reflecting on her experiences at WEP, agrees that it was not as challenging as she'd expected. She too assesses her education at WEP against the harsh demands of the "real world" outside the nurturing walls of WEP and is unsure her education will measure up.

Some [professors] were demanding. But, I didn't find it overall. No, I did not get that. It was not demanding enough...I think teachers who drop their standards to please students are not helping them at all. In the real world, no one drops their standards for you. Either you do it or you don't. And I think the more we're pushed to do the best we can, I think it's better. I really do.

Sandra sounds surprised when I question her about the challenges of college. She responds to my query, "Challenging? Like academically, I am going to say no. The challenge was balancing my job."

Adult students are often "time poor" as they juggle the demands of work, family, and school in a limited number of hours in the day (Bowl, 2003). In many respects, most WEP students are "adjunct students" whose contingent status impacts on their academic achievement in multiple ways. For many WEP students, the biggest challenge college presented them was finding time to attend class and complete their

assignments. For students taking more than one or two courses per semester, the quality of the assignments was made more difficult by the quantity of them.

However, some of my student research participants found the work at WEP demanding, at times very much so. Brenda describes some of the academic challenges she faced as a student at WEP.

There were times when the going got tougher than I had anticipated. There were times when the assignments seemed to be so difficult that I wished I could find someone willing to help me with writing my papers.... There was a semester when I was taking three writing intensive classes, that was really tough. That was really challenging, all this reading, all this writing.

Of the research participants who felt the curriculum was demanding, most supported it being so. Carmen explains her perspective on dealing with the rigors of college and the value of the academic challenges she experienced.

It's hard work. You should be prepared to set aside time to do what you need to do because if you think that you're not going to get a lot of work, that it's not going to be hard, you're fooling yourself. And, you're not going to get anything out of it if it's too easy. Why bother?

Lisa explains how academic rigor must be considered in the context of WEP students' lives as they are all working adults with multiple roles and responsibilities. She says,

And it [WEP] wasn't a breeze, it was as tough as any college, any school, any university could ever be. Sometimes the standard to me was a lot higher because we really did have to work a lot harder because we were going to college at night.

Every student research participant, in fact, mentioned some instructors they considered to be especially rigorous. All said they welcomed the extra challenge they saw these particular professors as demanding of them and the added learning that such demands inspired. William, for example, describes his academic advisor as "not accepting less than he thought I was able to do." He says that his professors at WEP

“...really pushed me to be better each time. And there were times when I felt like, wow, they’re a little harsh. But, I am who I am now because of that, because I was pushed hard at the time.” And he is grateful for that.

Faculty Perspectives on Academic Rigor

A minority of my student research participants seemed to realize that the academic rigor of WEP was considered less than stellar by some of the faculty who taught their classes. This troubling divergence in perspective reflects the fact that assessments of academic rigor are often determined through each individual’s retrospective comparison of the current educational experience against their previous ones. The faculty contrasted the depth and breadth of student learning at WEP with their college, and teaching, experiences at elite universities such as Wesleyan, Berkeley, NYU, and Harvard. Several of them also assessed the academic rigor of WEP in comparison with the standards they believe are maintained on the main campus of the college. Students, by and large, reflected on the demands of WEP in light of their prior education in poor urban public high schools, public community colleges, and non-competitive private post-secondary institutions. Unsurprisingly, as groups, they came to different conclusions about the rigor of WEP.

The faculty’s perspective on rigor pried the Pandora’s box wide open. My faculty research participants were unanimous in their perception that the majority of WEP students come to the program academically unprepared for college level work. This view is corroborated by the external standard of the CUNY entrance exams; the majority of my student research participants, all of whom were admitted prior to 1999 when remediation was eliminated at the CUNY senior colleges, failed at least one of

these exams, most commonly in math or writing. The faculty attributed students' lack in reading, writing and critical thinking skills to the inadequate education they had received in poor urban high schools and academically non-competitive urban colleges and to the time lag between their last academic endeavor and their enrollment in WEP. Hence, WEP students, by and large, need greater supports to stay afloat in an academically rigorous setting.

Some of the instructors I interviewed were quite blunt in expressing their frustration and dismay at what they saw as WEP students' lack of preparation for college, evidenced most clearly in their weak writing skills. One faculty person states,

Some of their writing skills really resemble high school or less sometimes. So, that's really been a challenge and also, some of them, their critical thinking skills are really lacking...

Faculty were frustrated by the time-consuming double challenge of teaching academically under-prepared students, who had been out of school often for many years, both the content specific to their course or discipline and the academic skills students needed to be able to critique complex readings, carry out research, and write college level papers. Most instructors had no prior training in teaching writing or research skills and WEP offered no on-going professional development to address the issue of how to simultaneously teach academic skills and course content.

Another faculty person claims that student literacy levels at WEP are "far lower" than those of students he teaches on the college main campus despite the fact that students at WEP must now pass the same battery of entrance exams as any student applying to the college. "There's a significant portion of my WEP classes that have been bordering on illiterate, like literally cannot put sentences together in, sort

of, conventional English,” he claims, wondering aloud if students should be permitted to write in Ebonics or other forms of non-standard English.

Another faculty person counters, and complicates, this assertion describing how WEP students may not have a command of academic writing conventions, but have strong ideas to communicate through their writing (as evidenced in this dissertation). She compares WEP students’ writing skills to those of students she taught at an elite private college.

Most of them [elite college students] can write sentences and superficial bullshit, but they haven’t learned to probe... A lot of our students don’t have that superficial bullshit thing down – that’s the difference. Some students really can’t write [but] what I think we have more of here is students who are capable of depth and grasping concepts, [even if] their academic skills aren’t good...

When queried about this supposed difference in the academic skills of WEP students and those on the main campus, another faculty person who has experience teaching both populations acknowledges that although the curriculum on-campus and at WEP is nominally the same, what students end up receiving is, in fact, quite different due to what he sees as WEP students’ “inadequate academic backgrounds.”

Another faculty person says that students come to WEP not knowing how to write, not reading books, not knowing how to use the library. Given the limited time adults have to dedicate to higher education, and the limited resources available at WEP to provide sufficient academic supports, these represent formidable obstacles to achieving and maintaining an academically rigorous education.

Expectations and Rigor

One instructor, comparing her teaching at a private elite university with her experience at WEP, reflects on both the classed nature of expectations in education

and how symbiotic expectations between teachers and students can be. She explores the link between students' class-based sense of entitlement, or not, to intellectual engagement and how this impacts on academic rigor and, ultimately, outcomes.

It doesn't sound right to me even when I say it, but it's true. I find that the students at [private elite college] expect more of me. They expect me to be well versed, they expect me to have lots of facts at my fingertips, they expect me to challenge them. The students at WEP, I think don't know what to expect a lot of times, they're not even sure what the topic of the class means. They may challenge me, but a lot of times they don't because they may not even know enough in terms of the language to challenge me... I wish the students at WEP would push me further, but they don't.

She responds to this challenge, modifying her curriculum, pedagogy, and expectations accordingly. Weis (1985) notes the impact such "negotiation" between faculty and students over the form and content of curriculum has on lowering academic standards in her study of a community college.

Another instructor concurs that WEP students sometimes push back when faced with a demanding course. She attributes this to what she calls the "service economy model" of education prevalent in our culture and present in some WEP students' heads. She bristles at the idea that education is a commodity to be bought and sold and says frankly, "it's not just about showing up."

Expectations, on the part of teachers and students, are inextricably linked with outcomes in education. Low teacher expectations of black students are well documented and theorized to be a significant contributing factor in depressing black, and Latino, students' academic achievement (Conchas, 2006; Ferguson, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999). That this would occur at WEP is both surprising and deeply sobering, given the program's mission of educational access and equity. Yet, several of my research participants suggested that this is the case.

Gillian describes the ways in which she sees an ethos of low expectations developing in the program. She reflects upon specific faculty who she believes started out with a perception of students' academic abilities as limited and, in turn, generated in students the expectation that they could not, and ought not, do more than a minimal level of work. This, she believes, spawned the practice of students pushing back against faculty who made greater demands.

...in a lot of classes the professors come in with this preconceived notion that the students are incapable of going to this [higher] level. And then they [the students] buy into that. I think that's what happens in most classes. You can tell in the way they respond to students' questions. They [the professors] come in expecting them not having the ability or being capable of learning.

Upon completing her degree, Gillian reflects on the overall impact she believes low expectations have had on her college education at WEP and expresses some regret. She says wistfully, "It's not like I felt my education is so much less than someone else's, but I thought I could have done better... I just felt like it [WEP] could be better."

While several student research participants hint at their dissatisfaction with the academic challenges of WEP, Gillian is clearly the student research participant with the strongest critique of WEP's academic rigor. Her plan to pursue her education outside WEP, and to parlay further education into career mobility, allow her a glimpse of the harsh standards to which she will be held beyond the caring walls of WEP. She is justifiably concerned that she has not been prepared to succeed in competitive academic and professional settings. I believe this is a shortcoming WEP ought to take seriously given students' desires, as explored in chapter 3, to activate their college educations for professional mobility.

Certainly, there is a complex and dynamic interaction between student and faculty expectations of academic rigor that may create what one faculty member refers to as a “culture of low expectations” at WEP. Several instructors expressed the sense that rigor and high standards were seen as oppositional to the ethos of care and compassion for adult students at WEP. These instructors see themselves as going against the tide in maintaining high academic standards in their classes. One faculty person describes the phenomenon of how she believes high standards are eroded over time as instructors capitulate in response to students’ fears of the demands of academia.

I don’t expect WEP students to write the way my [elite private college] students write. I assume because those students are so much more privileged and have so much more access to so much more, I expect a lot more out of them. And my students push back a lot at WEP with things like, ‘how do you expect us?’ I remember the first semester I taught at WEP, I had to lower my expectations because I came to them, much of the structure and the information comes out of a class I took at the Kennedy School at Harvard. So I came that first semester expecting that and the students got really upset and they said, ‘this is not Harvard and we’re not going to be able to do that kind of research, we’re not going to be able to. We have lives and jobs and other classes and this is the extent of what we can do.’ And so I got some great papers that first semester... but I certainly have lowered my expectations as semesters have progressed.

Another instructor who has also taught at a competitive private college concurs that his teaching is different and less rigorous at WEP. He alludes to the way in which caring may, unintentionally, supplant rigor in WEP courses when instructors attempt to support and nurture their students in being academically successful.

I am more rigorous at [private elite college] that I am at WEP. I don’t do all that touchy-feely that I might do at WEP...at WEP I feel that a serious part has an affective bent to it, because they need that. These are older students, you need to grab them by the hand, you need to talk to them, you need to be nice.

This instructor seems to imply that being “nice” and being rigorous can’t, or don’t, go hand in hand. Other faculty members, and a couple of my student research participants, explicitly question whether it is nice to deny students a rigorous education. Gillian and Florence reveal the complex tension between care and rigor as they ponder the value of their degrees in the “real world.” As Gillian considers applying for law school, she questions WEP’s effectiveness in preparing students for the harsh reality of standardized tests and other means of measuring and sorting people in our society. She doubts that students have left the warm cocoon of WEP armed with the academic skills and abilities they need to compete in competitive academic and work settings. Gillian wonders how WEP, and its students, will measure up when faced with a test like the LSAT. She explains,

I think the expectation is that the students who come to the WEP need more support, which is true. I did need more support, but at the same time it wasn’t challenging enough. Even now, I want to take the LSAT in October, but I feel like now I have to give Kaplan \$4,000 to prepare me to take it because I feel like I am so far behind where I need to be to score even a half-way decent score. So, I don’t think it was challenging enough.

Whether accurate or not, Gillian perceives Kaplan as a stand-in for the solid education she believes she missed out on at WEP.

Like Gillian, some of my other student research participants desired greater academic rigor and expressed anger at classmates who they believed pressured demanding faculty to lower their standards and expectations. Deborah, echoing black educators who have historically associated rigor with aiding students to reach their highest potential, writes of one such experience.

The professor dared to require his class to do a 50 page research paper. Panic set in and he was attacked verbally and subjected to complaints being registered to the department heads about him. He finally compromised and

lowered the standards he had set for the class... There were only a few students who understood his teaching methods... I believe that it was the professor's hope that each student would realize his/her own highest potential. How can a student know what his/her highest potential is unless he/she is challenged to meet such goals or standards in life?

Florence, reflecting on the same instructor, says,

“I did not take his no-nonsense way of teaching to be offensive, but as a tool that would help me to improve my writing skills. I knew I had to work hard to pass this class and I appreciated his concern for our well being.”

Like several of my student research participants, Florence is aware that her academic skills were rusty when she began at WEP and calls for a required introductory remedial reading and writing class for all students who have been out of school for many years. She clearly understands the relationship between the rigor she is calling for and the need for significant academic supports. It is ironic that just such foundational supports for entering students have been eliminated by the university under the guise of raising academic standards (McCormack, 2005).

Race, Class, Age and Rigor

Both Gillian and a black faculty member explicitly link lack of program rigor to racism, which is complicated by the fact that there is a predominantly white faculty teaching students of color at WEP. In the fall 1999 semester, only one-third of the faculty members at WEP were people of color (Gittell & Budner, 2000). Although this may compare favorably to other colleges and universities with overwhelmingly white faculties, it still stands in great contrast to the almost entirely black and Latino student body in the undergraduate program at WEP.

The black faculty member reflects on the ways in which racism may creep into assessing students' academic abilities and potential and honestly communicating to students about their strengths and weaknesses.

I will tell them, you do a very, very poor paper and the teacher gives you an A knowing very well that it is a bad paper. That's racism. And I can see the whole class up in smoke. I say maybe not racism, maybe the professor feels guilty and is not wanting to shut you down... but, you're not really helping anyone are you?

Gillian sees low expectations emanating from a faculty who, in their majority, are a different race and ethnicity than the students they teach. She attributes low expectations to faculty's perception of students' intellectual abilities based on race, age, gender, and class.

At first I thought it was just strictly age, but then I thought it was race and age. Definitely...If there was one thing I could change about the program it would be the level of expectations from the faculty....They [faculty] think they [students] can't get beyond this point. They think they're just trying to fill up some life dream – going back to school, that this is really not a big deal.”

A black faculty member reiterates this view of the role of race in defining expectations at WEP which he sees as reflective of larger societal trends and relationships. He is justifiably concerned about the impact of race on expectations in a program where the teachers are majority white and the students are almost all black and Latino.

...the students are majority black and I don't know what the relationship is between the teaching body and the student body in terms of color, but my gut feeling is that there are more white [faculty] than people of color. So, this relationship has somewhat replicated the existing power relationships in society.

Another faculty person echoes Gillian's perspective on the relationship between students' race, gender, age and staff and faculty's expectations of what going to college meant for these students.

...people were almost like it doesn't really matter if these students, if their degree doesn't mean anything, cause they already have jobs, and they already have kids, and their life's half over [laughs sardonically]... They looked at their [the students] subject position and decided, well, you know, you can't, this isn't Berkeley.

This instructor also described what she saw as a liberal ethic that constrained rigor and sold the students short. She saw in the program,

this white liberal, let's not push the students of color, middle aged female students of color too hard, they've had a difficult life. ... I felt like our students deserved more – more rigor, more resources, and a different kind of climate at the WEP. The willingness to accommodate the status quo there I think did a tremendous disservice to the students and the faculty.

Program Vision and Intentions

This perception of WEP lacking in academic rigor is in great contrast to the program's intentions and vision as articulated by several participants who helped to found the program. A union leader recalls that the initial mission of the program was to “train people intellectually around the issues they work at everyday.” He emphasizes that there was an awareness from the outset “...that it not be a watered down program, [that] it be academically rigorous... the academic side should know what it is doing and they should craft the program and develop the curriculum and all that stuff...”

The director of worker education confirms this conception of the mission of the program.

... our approach is we aren't going to water anything down, we are just going to get them up to a level they have to be to get them through the program, and

it's going to be a real program and we're going to be proud of their education and if it means we're going to have to hire tutors and counselors, that's our job, to provide them whatever they need to succeed.

Yet, mentioned twice in the second page of an evaluation report on WEP that was commissioned by the director of worker education at the college was the tension between balancing rigor and compassion for adult learners. The report states that WEP, "walks a fine line in trying to balance providing an academic challenge to adults while sympathizing with their educational struggles" (Gittell & Budner, p.4, 2000). The question of how to balance compassion and rigor have been with the program since its inception, yet still remain to be adequately resolved.

An instructor, reflecting on this tension, describes his involvement in a short-term collaborative professional development project undertaken some years ago at WEP, and argues that part of the program's mission, as interpreted by the staff at that time, was to make WEP more educationally sound. He explains that "there definitely was a mission in the years I was there to make it more academically serious... there was definitely that kind of medium term mission in the program..." This same instructor expresses that what he learned in teaching at WEP was how to "be super rigorous about writing," confirming the student research participants' depiction that some instructors are achieving the delicate balance of rigor and support in some classes.

A former director describes one of her goals for the program demonstrating a broad and sophisticated conception of college access. She believes it is not enough to just get students in the door, or through the program, but that commitment to access

implies access to ideas and abilities traditionally denied working class students of color for whom vocationally oriented higher education remains the norm.

One of them [the goals] was to say that we weren't going to pass people through and this is reflected a lot in the [development of] writing [intensive courses]. People come here without good writing skills and we're not going to let them out at the other end without writing skills as if they can't learn.... It's hard, but everybody can learn to write. People can learn to develop that skill, it's not this thing that's cordoned off from our students. I think there's some disrespect from some people in our program towards the students who want to say, 'just move them on through, they don't really need this'...

Nevertheless, implementing rigor is complicated by the range of students' abilities and backgrounds. A former director explains how the students with the strongest academic backgrounds may miss out on important intellectual challenges as the program's resources and attention have gone towards bringing up those with the weakest skills. Perhaps this focus on equity for under-prepared students has eclipsed the need for rigor for those with stronger academic skills and contributed to weakening the program's academic standards. She explains this tension,

I think one of the things we have done pretty well and are working towards in a good way is dealing with the weaker students, but I don't think we have done as well with the stronger students. It's hard, we are working with students with a range of skills. Our tendency has been to want to make it okay for the people who are weaker.

One instructor believed that the program had certain working myths about itself and, she argued, that "the philosophy of 'meeting students where they're at' became an excuse, I think, to deliver less than the students were capable of." She goes on to critique the role of promoting self-esteem in an academic program and argues,

I don't feel like self-esteem should be the goal of the program. This is the City University of New York and they should get to feel that they are learning to be scholars...I really often felt like the goal of the program was so that they would feel like, so that they would have high self-esteem. And that academics didn't matter as much. And that was very frustrating to me. And I never did

that in my class. I was always nice to my students and I was encouraging, of course, and funny... so it's not like I was mean to them, but I also felt like they're there because they want to engage, they're not there so that they can get a pat on the back for neat penmanship. And I felt like my students were really responsive to that."

This instructor claims that she got the message that her expectations were too high from a program staff person who told her that "this wasn't Berkeley. And I would always say, 'you know what? My students are just as bright as my students at Berkeley.'" This instructor, who has a reputation for being academically rigorous and was well respected among my student research participants, claims that there was nothing she taught at Berkeley that she didn't teach at WEP.

Another instructor also posits that the elevation of self-esteem over academics has a deleterious effect on students' achievement and he wonders aloud whether self-esteem garnered through lowered standards is really self-esteem at all. Instead, he argues that true self-esteem can be derived through initial failure and the academic struggle it provokes. He claims that

sometimes you should have a self-esteem crisis in a student who doesn't master the materials because sometimes there's self-esteem to be recreated through that process in a positive way which I am willing to take the responsibility of helping them to do...

Rigor and Resources

All of my faculty research participants understood the deep connection between rigor and resources and recognized that substantial institutional constraints stood in WEP's path towards greater rigor. It was commonly understood that providing academically under-prepared students a rigorous college education was a challenging goal that required more than ordinary resources. Most recognized that the allocation of additional resources to WEP was politically charged, and unlikely, given

that financial support for public education is under fire and resources at the CUNY senior colleges are being directed away from students like those at WEP towards the development of honors programs. As one instructor commented,

There's big issues. CUNY is under-funded, there is a shift away from funding precisely that kind of student in the CUNY system and going for these undergraduates at the day level who graduate in four years. So, [WEP is] already under fire in that way. The vision of the ideal CUNY student is not the WEP student, so the whole system is skewed against them. That's the big overarching system ...

A former director of WEP reflected on the inequity in resource distribution in higher education overall where students, like those at WEP, who need the most support and resources, usually get the least. Unlike highly resourced private colleges which have small classes and well-funded writing centers, WEP counts on one staff person – funded not by the college, but by a consortium of labor unions – to provide academic supports for all WEP students.

In small private colleges, the classes are 10 – 12 people, they have a skills center, all those services. And in those classes there are some students who can not write... We need more support for the students. Right now we have [one skills instructor paid for by the unions]. That's it.

Yet, the director of worker education at the college argued that WEP provides a no-holds barred support for its students while maintaining high academic standards.

...we fight like hell to get the resources to provide whatever they [the students] need and do whatever it takes to get them through the program, to get them through the degree without watering anything down...

This perception of WEP as being rich in resources that are directed towards providing students academic supports is contested by many of my other research participants who lamented the fact WEP did not provide students important aspects of the college experience and expressed anger at what they consider to be its “stepchild”

status within the college. While the mid-town location of WEP was convenient for many students and instructors, being a satellite center also had significant downsides. Students had access to none of the college's on-campus resources in the site where they attended class. They had few full-time faculty, no leafy campus, no working library, limited computer and internet access, no private space in which to meet with instructors, and no clubs or extracurricular activities. One instructor described how these material lacks highlighted the importance of academic rigor to making WEP feel like a "real college." She said, "I really wanted the students to really feel like they were in college, even though we didn't have a library, and they didn't have regular faculty, all that stuff..."

Adjunct Labor and Rigor

The widespread increase in adjunct labor nationwide (Nelson & Watt, 2004) is vividly apparent at the City University of New York where, according to the faculty union, more than half of the courses overall are taught by adjunct instructors (who are paid low wages, receive few benefits, get no support for research, and are not compensated for spending time with students in office hours, for preparing classes, or for grading papers). Yet, WEP relies on adjunct labor to an extraordinary degree. In the fall semesters from 1999 – 2004, close to eighty percent of all undergraduate classes at WEP were taught by adjunct instructors (personal communication).

There are compelling arguments for why adjunct instructors are a rich and valuable resource to a worker education program. Former program adjuncts include elected city officials, union leaders, and community and labor activists whose non-academic work experiences enrich the labor and urban studies curriculum of WEP.

But, this high proportion of adjunct instructors also has a detrimental effect on the program's academic coherence and its ability to maintain high standards and provide sufficient supports to students for the development of reading, writing, and analytical skills, as articulated by several of the adjuncts I interviewed.

One instructor describes the tremendous irony of her situation as an adjunct teaching a course on labor economics and the impact her adjunct status has on the quality of her teaching at WEP.

Last night my class on labor economics was about contingent work and we were talking about how the economy is moving more and more from full-time permanent jobs to independent contractors and part-time temporary work and it came up that, as an adjunct, I am part of that workforce and we talked a lot about how in truth I am not doing justice to them as an adjunct faculty.

She further reflects on how she balances the challenges of teaching, and a very demanding job as an activist, and the ways in which being an adjunct compromises the academic integrity of her teaching, specifically her ability to respond effectively to students' writing. She explains,

At the beginning when I first started teaching at WEP, I would go through every paper and correct their grammar and their writing and I just can't do it anymore. Now I only grade on substance and sometimes if it's really bad, I'll ask them to re-write it, but other than that I'm hoping that they have writing instructors who can help them.

As an adjunct she justifiably feels unable to provide students the supports they need, so she has slowly and steadily lowered her expectations in ensuing semesters.

Another adjunct instructor describes the catch-22 many dedicated adjuncts at WEP find themselves in given that they were often attracted to teaching in this union-supported worker education program because of their own union backgrounds and/or commitment to working class empowerment. The material reality of her situation as

an adjunct, compounded by her deep sense of labor exploitation, adversely impacts on her ability to provide students the supports she believes they deserve.

...the other contradiction is that this place is labor, labor, labor and it treated its own labor so badly...I was getting bupkis from CUNY and from WEP, on the one hand and on the other hand the students were pushing, they were upset for not getting more of my time, how come I don't have office hours, how come there aren't more comments on my paper, I'd like to re-do this a couple more times, can you read it three more times before my final assignment? And I would have loved to have given them all those things, and I just couldn't. And they don't know. My last year there I said something to a student, all these courses are adjunct taught and they said, 'what's an adjunct?' I'm like, we don't work here...we don't get benefits, we only get paid an hourly...

She also describes how what she did out of the classroom changed over the course of her tenure at WEP. No longer willing to work eighteen hours per week when she was paid for three she began to limit supports students sorely needed – not giving out her home phone number, not staying late and coming early to consult with students – as they represented a serious infringement on her time. She says bluntly, “I felt like I was ripping them [the students] off.” This instructor ultimately found that the compromises her adjunct status forced her to make, in an effort to balance students' needs against her own labor exploitation, were untenable and she left teaching. Though she clearly understands that these tensions are not exclusive to WEP, but reflective of the state of higher education nationally, they are exacerbated by the greater needs academically under-prepared adult students present. She reflects on her decision to leave WEP,

When I decided to leave it was really sad for me because I understood that by leaving, especially in this economy, it was the end of my teaching career because the jobs are just not there....It's this thing where you think this is the thing I am supposed to do on the planet, I think I'm good at it, and I love it... I love teaching... and that was very, very heartbreaking for me to walk out of there at the end of last semester.

A program administrator acknowledges that the extensive use of adjunct instructors at WEP has also created differences in the WEP and on-campus urban studies curriculum. He believes that,

We have not done a good job of really providing oversight here as much as we should so that the courses aren't as uniform in the sense of following our sense of what the curriculum should be and how it should develop.

Full-time junior faculty find themselves in similar situation to adjuncts, given that the priority of the university is on research and publication not teaching, and tenure decisions are made accordingly. One junior faculty member who teaches a class at WEP comments on how what he calls the “academic speed-up” negatively impacts on the quality of education students receive.

I have to say that from my position it's really not all that different in the sense that being a full-time faculty member, I have to publish, I have this huge administrative service obligation to this department, and I have other classes I have to teach... I get paid more than adjuncts, but.. there are no more hours in the week. I have not taken a day off since the first day of the semester. Period. I have maxed out my time. I agree it's even worse for adjuncts... but I think the end result is the dumbing down of education...

WEP – like many institutions of higher education – provides little pedagogical support for its instructors, despite the considerable instructional challenges described in this chapter. Many of my faculty research participants said they would love more time and space to reflect on, and improve, their teaching at WEP. Several instructors revealed that the interview with me was the most time they had spent thinking and talking about their teaching at WEP in years and that it was a dialogue they sorely missed and needed.

One instructor who says he has received little to no pedagogical support from the program laments having to figure out all on his own what approaches work best

with adult students. A former director explained that there were no regular faculty meetings for WEP instructors because no funds had been allocated to compensate teachers for attendance. As a labor educator, she does not want to further exploit adjunct instructors by requiring that they attend meetings for which they receive no additional compensation. As there is no on-going professional development, or even regular faculty meetings, the high number of adjuncts in the program leads to an atomized work experience in which instructors come, teach their class, and leave with little contact, and less collaboration, with the other faculty members. Not only is this personally alienating, it impacts on curricular coherence as the faculty has few opportunities to discuss the content and inter-connections between their courses.

Several staff and faculty asserted that despite the climate of limited resources for public education, the worker education program could do a better job of allocating internal resources towards prioritizing teaching and learning – which they believed to be the heart of the mission of worker education – over producing publications and hosting labor education forums. This sentiment was echoed in the findings of a program evaluation commissioned by the director of worker education at the college which reported a staff perception of “inequity in resources” with too little directed towards educational programs (Gittell & Budner, p.9, 2000).

Life Experience and Academic Knowledge: A Model for Rigor

One question of academic rigor that may be unique to WEP, and other adult college programs, is the prominent role student life and work experience play in the WEP curriculum. While life experience is a rich resource adult students bring with them into school, and a central feature of caring pedagogy (Noddings, 1984; 1992),

several of my research participants revealed potential downsides to locating student experience at the core of the curriculum in a program struggling to achieve greater academic rigor. Several faculty members spontaneously remarked on the challenge of balancing the rich, deep, life experience of their students with bodies of academic knowledge amassed through research. These instructors commented on the ways in which the holding up of life experience at times allowed students to circumvent rigorous thinking about the social issues that form the heart of the WEP curriculum. These instructors were concerned that students be able to locate their individual experience in a social and historical context and that they learn to value academic knowledge as they sharpen their critical skills.

One instructor argues that students could benefit from learning to distinguish between experience-based and media-generated information and research-based knowledge. He comments,

I believe that students could benefit from Hey! Somebody did research about something! This is what they did, this is what they found out. This is different from what you are reading in the newspaper, this is different from what you are seeing on TV, this is different from your own personal experience...

He acknowledges that it is hard for students to access, and assess, this kind of research-based information without honing their academic skills.

Another instructor expressed a similar discomfort with student experience being at the center of knowledge making in WEP classes and saw it, at times, as an obstacle to critical analysis of social issues. She explained how her course goals often bumped up against the faith and value students placed in their own experiences as city workers, for example, in an academic program with an urban studies curriculum.

I really wanted them to be able, yes to draw from their own experiences, but also to be able to de-center a little bit, because one of the things that you, I think, run into with any student and especially with students who have a lot of what is called 'life experience' is that they tend to, there can be a tendency, and we all do it, to extrapolate from your own experience and generalize...so I would say a really big thing in my classes was to try and get students to de-center from their own experience and open up their minds...

...it's about getting people to look at their own experience in more of a social context... if you've got four or five people's life experience and then if all of you have experienced this then you can say it's a social trend...sometimes life experience, mining it can be really rich, but it can also be an obstacle.

Even some students noted this downside to the prominent role life experience played in some of the WEP classes. Gillian, who is younger than many of her classmates and counts on less life experience, recalls,

There were times [in classes] when I would have an opinion and it was almost worth nothing because I didn't have the life experience... a lot of subjects [would] come up where they [other students] had first hand knowledge and I would say, I read this somewhere and they would say, well I lived it. It was a little difficult because they had this first hand knowledge, but I felt I had something else, but it was almost worth nothing to the students.

Adair's (2005) study of welfare recipients who were attending college underscored the tensions between what is considered legitimate academic knowledge and the power and value of personal experience, particularly for working class and poor students. One of her participants explains that "personal experience is not a legitimate basis for disagreement in school, whereas it is a form of truth for poor people" (p. 13). Perhaps WEP bends over backwards to legitimate the life experiences of adult students in opposition to this tendency of traditional schools to deny the value of experience, unintentionally compromising rigor in the process. Several of my research participants advocated for a middle ground whereby students can test the validity and generalizability of their life experience against knowledge

derived through academic inquiry and vice-versa. They argue against an acritical elevation of life experience without sufficient examination of its social context. One adjunct instructor theorized what a program that successfully integrates rigor in the context of student experience would look like.

I suppose the mission would be both to create a model of something very, very rigorous academically without reproducing a kind of academia that is not specific to the people who are in it. In other words, it's not rigorous because we are forcing these people to adopt this whole system of things that isn't theirs and function well within it. It's rigorous because we are rigorously handling what we know, what we do, and what are our issues, turning back experience and handling it very seriously and rigorously.

It is precisely this kind of critical analysis of life experience within its social, political, and historical context that other faculty research participants yearned for and the kind of model a program like WEP is positioned to create in which traditional notions of rigor are questioned and re-configured, but not jettisoned. This notion of rigor, if enacted, could present an exciting practical application of the role of student experience in critical pedagogy as theorized by critical educators (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Giroux, 2001).

Rigor as a Social Justice Issue

The notion of rigor as an issue of educational equity was the sub-text of many of my faculty research participants' critique of rigor at WEP. One instructor is explicit in framing his desire to provide students an academically rigorous education with the social justice values that guide his work as a professor of urban studies. He sees rigor as an equity issue and wants to ensure that his students at WEP get the same demanding course from him that he teaches traditional-aged students on the main campus. He explains,

...periodically the students ask me, 'why can't you just cut some of the work and not make us do so much work?' and I say, 'well I teach this class at the main campus and they have the same amount of work why would I give less to you? You're paying for this education, you're supposed to be learning, why would you think that you want to get less work?' I said, 'what would that say about me if I gave you less material than I give them? What would that say about you and your capacity to learn and your role in education?' And most of them buy into that and think that is true. That they should be getting the exact same educational experience as people on the main campus.

Another instructor echoes this sentiment and argues that any perception of WEP students as less intellectually competent than their peers on the main campus was flawed. She argues that the key to stopping the perpetuation of this stereotype was through providing WEP students a rigorous curriculum, which she did.

I thought they [the students] were capable and they certainly proved that they were capable of scholarly work and of complex thought and original ideas and that not to push them or not to challenge them on that kind of thing, I think, would have been very condescending. They came as students and I have to treat them as students. This isn't a certificate program where you show up ten times and you get a gold star...

Although most of my faculty research participants were very aware that students had been previously disserved by their educations and come academically unprepared for college, they felt passionately that WEP should not replicate these experiences and that an important program goal should be to stop the mediocre education of working class people in its tracks.

The instructor quoted above concludes, "When they graduate I want them to feel I went through a real thing, not an approximation of college, but I went through college and that means something." Uncovering what college meant to the adult students at WEP was the driving force behind this research. Students, quite passionately and articulately, I believe, tell us what their college educations mean to them in chapters 3 & 4 and express their deep belief that they are achieving their goal

of intellectual development at WEP. That some of their professors express skepticism that the program, as a whole, is achieving these goals, is deeply unsettling.

Education as “Value Added”

One faculty person who refuted the charges that the program lacks academic rigor offered the compelling argument that students’ education at WEP represented a significant “value added” to the students’ lives, jobs, and communities. He frames the charges against WEP’s academic rigor as elitist and ideologically based. He argued that,

There is elitism which is a problem, which is an ideological issue...Students come in and they come out with more than they came in with and that’s good. They may not come out the same as someone coming out from Yale, but so what? They come out with more than they came in with and they benefit the city... our view is that the standards are artificial and if we don’t do this job there’s nobody else who will and so people who could get a benefit through higher education won’t get it. But, I haven’t heard any problem raised with the education here outside of that kind of academic elitism.

This instructor frames the question of rigor not in terms of comparing WEP to the Ivy League, but in realistically comparing the education students receive at WEP with the kind of education working class students of color receive at the other public colleges and proprietary schools they might have attended. His focus is on the justice that is served in providing these students an education they might not receive elsewhere. He concludes that,

I don’t know any negatives in that sense of the output. We’re certainly not a degree mill. I mean the students who come out of here know more than when they come in and I don’t know what you can ask more than that. As you said in the beginning... they had a poor secondary education and if they are graduate students they had a poor undergraduate education and we can’t undo that. The best we can do is take what they now know which is both their academic experience and their life experience and help them to build on it...the whole point is value added, they come out with more than they came in...

This instructor does not weigh the merits of a “value added” view of education against the claim that students are being denied educational equity if WEP is not as rigorous as it could be and the fact that students leave with more than they came is satisfactory to him. He is alone, among my research participants, in advocating this view of academic rigor which seems to relieve WEP of responsibility for reflecting critically on its mission and practice. That most of the instructors who participated in my research desire to hold WEP to higher academic standards is, I believe, both commendable and noteworthy.

Conclusion

These are tricky times in which to undertake a critique of rigor at a public college serving academically under-prepared adults. It would be easy to silence critique in favor of bolstering a vulnerable and valuable program struggling to stay afloat in choppy waters. But, ultimately, I believe no one gains from acritical cheerleading, least of all the WEP students who have been so egregiously disserved by schools in the past. While it is risky for me to take up this subject, the prevalence and vehemence with which it surfaced as a theme in my data compelled me to do so.

I am genuinely heartened that none of my research participants had simple answers to the complex question of achieving rigor at WEP. All were keenly aware that the struggle for rigor at WEP is bound by deep structural constraints and is a local example of a national dilemma. Nevertheless, no one was satisfied with that as an explanation or excuse. Many held themselves, and consequently WEP, to higher standards precisely because they saw academic rigor for WEP students as a question

of educational equity and social justice – values they believe are intimately linked with the vision and mission of WEP as a union-supported adult college program.

All the staff and faculty who participated in my research oppose the university's decision to eliminate remediation at the four year colleges and are passionate about college access for working adults. Rather than this critique of rigor leading to calls for exclusion, most of my research participants suggested that college access ought to be even more open to students like those at WEP. They understand that resources are key to enacting the mission of high educational standards and their critique is a cry for sufficient supports to move academically under-prepared students to high levels of academic achievement.

Many of my participants were acutely aware that the current political climate makes it difficult for instructors to enact this vision of care with rigor. Punitive college policies may in fact exert pressure on faculty to lower their standards and let marginal students slip by because the penalties for failing a class, or not progressing towards graduation according to the average timeline, are so great (McCormack, 2005). Regulations that make financial aid – even union tuition reimbursement – contingent upon students receiving certain grades end up becoming an incentive to grade inflation. Colleges – like WEP – that serve adult students who work full-time and are raising families are criticized, rather than applauded, for students with ten year graduation rates. The elimination of remediation ends up taking away the very courses that could give marginal students a more solid academic foundation. All these pressures position care and rigor as diametrically opposed, rather than mutually

enhancing, and make it even more difficult for programs like WEP to enact rigorous, caring education.

These findings represent a cautionary tale for progressive educators working in other small sites of possibility where a commitment to care may easily overshadow the importance of high expectations and academic rigor. I hope the experiences of WEP – the tensions, the challenges, the slippery slope of enabling and disabling – highlight the importance of positing rigor and care as mutually reinforcing parts of the same goal: educational equity for students who have been ill-served by schools in the past.

Chapter 7

“We keep the theme alive”

Possibilities and Limits of Education for Social Change

When you walk into WEP, the walls tell a story of what the place is about. Not your ordinary college findings. The front table to the left of the door as you enter holds flyers for a “Life After Bush” rally, a “War Times” newspaper, a NY Labor History Association newsletter, the program student and faculty literary magazine, and the booklet on the “Worker Education & Social Change” project. The walls hold assorted labor history posters, photos from the latest WEP graduation ceremony, covers of a book on Ella Baker and one by Lani Guinier, an 1180 CWA political poster, Not In Our Name anti-war flyers, announcements to students about flu shots and financial aid workshops, and a community map of Williamsburg done in an urban studies class. What do the students see when they look at this place? What do they read from the information on the walls about the program, its politics, its mission? What do I read? Can they not be the same? (Field note, 1/7/04)

WEP, as a union-supported worker education program, embodies multiple commitments to social justice – a commitment to educational access and equity for adult worker students; a commitment to organized labor and the struggles of working class people; and a commitment to preserving public higher education – all of which run counter to prevailing trends in U.S. society and our system of higher education.

Many of those who work within WEP articulate a further commitment to education for social change and aspire to enact democratic, progressive education in the tradition of the worker education programs of the early 20th century which linked higher education – for workers, for women, and for ethnic and racial minorities – to a broad conception of education for collective advancement and social transformation (Altenbaugh, 1990; Howlett, 1993; London, 1990). Like their predecessors in earlier worker education programs, many educators at WEP are deeply committed to workers’ intellectual development and combine liberal arts curriculum and

progressive pedagogies in an attempt to raise the critical consciousness of their worker-students (Heller, 1986; Hollis, 1994; 2001). Significantly, they view education as one part of a larger social movement – with which many are intimately and actively involved – to improve the lives of working people (Altenbaugh, 1990). While worker education programs today span the ideological spectrum (London, 1990), critical pedagogies and liberal arts curricula remain most common at union-based programs, such as WEP, which grow out of this tradition of progressive education for workers (Belanger & Strom, 1999).

While worker education programs have not precipitated radical social reform, they continue to keep the ideals of education for social change and the collective advancement of the working class alive, even during periods of extreme economic and political adversity for working class people – such as our current one (Altenbaugh, 1990). In this chapter, I examine the possibilities and limits of doing education for social change within this one union-supported college degree program for working adults, ever mindful that exploration of local constraints often serves to illuminate macro structures. I consider the ways in which students are (or are not) transformed by their educational experiences; inspired (or not) to view education as a force for social change in our society; and, most critically, come to see themselves (or not) as social change agents capable of enacting the values imbued in the WEP curriculum and pedagogy.

Of course, contemporary worker education programs, such as WEP, do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they struggle to survive within a higher education context that is often ignorant of, and hostile to, worker education's history, values, and aims.

University-affiliated worker education programs, like WEP, often find themselves at odds with both the institutions with which they are affiliated and their own students' conceptions of the purpose and worth of a college degree. Though widely considered the champions of individual social mobility, higher education institutions more often serve to reproduce social inequity (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Carney & Levin, 1985; Chajet, 2005; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002) and only rarely position themselves as actors for progressive social change (Aronowitz, 2000). As corporate influence in higher education prevails, the interests of business further dominate the research and academic agendas of colleges and universities and contribute to the increasing vocationalization of the college curriculum (Aronowitz, 2000; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Nasaw, 1979).

While more U.S. students aspire to attend higher education than ever before – over 95% of high school students report that they plan to go to college (Rosenbaum, 2001) – college access, persistence and graduation rates reveal a painful counter-story. According to US Department of Education statistics, only 17% of African Americans and 11% of Latinos twenty-five and older have college degrees. The surge in open admissions at public colleges and universities of the late 1970's – which brought many WEP students into higher education the first time around – has been effectively reversed through changes in financial aid policy that favor the middle class (Bloom, 2005; Mortenson, 1990) and the implementation of new entrance criteria at many four year colleges, such as CUNY, that channel academically under-prepared students into community colleges – the institutions from which they are least likely to graduate (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1991).

Changes in our post-industrial economy fuel students' college-going ambitions at the same time that market forces diminish the value of a college degree (Anyon, 2005; Aronowitz, 2000; Lafer, 2002). The quest for a college degree with employment potential has intensified the vocationalization of the higher education curriculum, with more students – particularly those who are working class and poor – seeking out degrees with high market value over deep educational worth (Aronowitz, 2000; Brint & Karabel, 1989). Recent concern over college standards and the educational merits of certain degrees – particularly those awarded by institutions that serve large numbers of working class and poor students – have led to calls for standardized college exit exams modeled after the tests implemented at the K – 12 level under NCLB (Arenson, 2006; Hickok, 2006; NYT editorial, 2/26/06). Thus, higher education finds itself at the crux of many vexing economic and social problems in the United States today.

This is the context in which a tiny program, like WEP, struggles to stay afloat, in which I ask the compelling yet oft-neglected question: what does it mean to strive to enact education for social change? In this chapter, I explore both the possibilities, and constraints, that undergird education for transformation at WEP.

Possibilities of Education for Social Change

Many contemporary critical pedagogues, including some of the faculty who teach at WEP, ground their educational approach in the seminal work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who envisioned literacy acquisition by the disenfranchised as a political act (Freire, 1970). By melding the teaching of literacy to critical analysis and consciousness-raising, Freire (1970) envisioned education as inextricably bound to

collective action against oppressive social, political, and economic forces. Current practitioners of critical pedagogy adapt this tradition to their own educational contexts, but continue to view education as a vehicle for critical consciousness-raising and collective social change (Darder et al, 2003; Leistyna, et al, 1996). Quite unlike the vocational education that dominates the curricula and pedagogy of many urban public colleges and universities, WEP, at its best, strives to meld liberal arts education with curricula and pedagogies that inspire critical analysis and consciousness-raising.

Teaching for Critical Consciousness: Faculty and Staff Perspectives on Possibility

Many of my WEP faculty participants consciously base their educational approach on such critical pedagogical traditions and articulate a deep belief in the potential of education to be both personally, and socially, transformative. They advocate the importance of WEP as a space for oppositional discourse and the nurturing of critical consciousness.

A long-time WEP instructor describes the classroom as one of the few spaces in our society for democratic discourse and the contestation of ideas and beliefs. He describes his pedagogical goals as creating democratic space and promoting critical thought. He remarks,

...I think the classroom is also a focus of social change. You can challenge a lot of ideas, you can push people to move beyond where they are, you can challenge their beliefs, you can say, 'No, I don't think that makes sense.' There are very few spaces where we have the possibility of having a discourse that challenges our beliefs... To have a space where your ideas can be contested, I think there are very few spaces and the classroom is one... My goal is not to be the one who is right, my goal is that we have good ideas on the table and people decide by themselves. So, that's how we can be transformed.

Another faculty person argues that “hundreds of students have gotten a much broader view of the way society works, the way the city works, the kind of issues it faces, why it faces them and what might be done” through WEP. This instructor believes that students are made “more conscious, critical, and aware” through their tenure in the program.

A faculty person describes how he teaches “liberal arts oriented big idea courses about how the world works” that emphasize critical thinking on social issues in urban studies. He explains, “My goals at WEP are twofold: to deliver...academically rigorous experience for the students... and to weave those things together into a kind of social justice perspective around urban studies.” He is convinced that the director of WEP wants the program to engage in “big ideas.”

The director of worker education at the college concurs, explaining that the “progressive orientation to the [WEP] curriculum” mirrors the values of the labor movement and that an important program goal is for students to understand social issues from the perspective of the labor movement.

Yet another instructor states that her goals as a teacher at WEP are “to help folks think critically about policy, about media, about academia, about all the power that’s around them, to think critically about power and break it down and be able to respond in an intelligent way...” She thinks the program mission is, or ought to be, attaining, “...a degree that allows them [students] to think more broadly about their role in the world as workers and as union members and as civil servants...”

Another instructor explained her pedagogical objectives: “I just really, really wanted to create an environment where people would think critically and people

would take that out of the classroom...” But, she is also quick to clarify that critical analysis does not mean blind acceptance of any particular political dogma and she explains how hard academics complement the development of critical thought.

You are not required to accept my analysis of any of the material or accept the analysis of anybody that we are reading or studying to get an A in this class. What you are required to do is back up your claims, produce good scholarly work and here’s how you do it: assemble evidence for your position, think critically. So, there was never any sort of ideological test in my classes.

The vast majority of courses taught at WEP were designed to engage students with social issues and to expose them to politically progressive ideas about the questions and concerns that dominate the fields of urban and labor studies.

Seeing the ‘Big Picture’: Student Perspectives on Possibility

Though most students enter WEP unaware of the history of progressive worker education or the influence of critical pedagogy on their instructors, many of my student research participants described their educations at WEP as exposing them to “the big picture” of social and political issues. The memoirs and interviews reveal that many students’ worlds, prior to coming to WEP were dominated by the concerns of parenthood, financial stresses, demanding yet not very satisfying nine-to-five jobs, communities that, perhaps, do not reflect broadly or critically upon their interests.

Being in college at WEP opened the box for some students to situate themselves in something larger and loftier. Lisa explains what this meant to her.

...Before I went to college, my world was very small. Even though I didn’t think it was, but it was very, it revolved around my family and my children and my job, but my world was very limited and very small. Coming to college, coming to WEP, opened all that up. I was like, I couldn’t believe all these things were going on around me and I didn’t know them... I learned so much. I became an advocate, we went up to Albany... I never ever would have been the Lisa Charles I am now had I never been in college. It just opens you up, it really does.

An instructor echoes this sense that a primary goal of education at WEP ought to be enlarging students' worlds. She remarked, "I wanted them to see it's big out there and there's a lot to see."

Sandra is eloquent in describing what she feels she learned at WEP: a willingness to look beneath the obvious for root causes and structural solutions to social issues.

...what was really drummed into my head was that you always have to look at the root causes of things. You don't just look at people and say, oh those people are like that. You ask, why are they like that? There's...a structure or design that makes things that way that you have to look at. That's one thing that I really learned is how to critique and look at the root causes of something so you don't just look at the good and what glitters, you look at what's underneath, the causes.

Sandra recalls one staff person's exhorting the incoming students on the role of community and social change in the program. She reflects,

[The staff person] kept harping on community this and community that. But, we didn't want to hear that at the time, we had our own dreams and we knew where we wanted to go and where we wanted to be. We were still in the same mindset that you go to college and you get a degree and you go out and get a job and it was all about self. And you make more money so that you can buy more things. And that was basically where we were headed... and then it began to penetrate, like, wait a minute, look at what has been done to us. And then you sort of realize that you are a product of your own experience... and if you don't want to be a participant in your own destruction then you have to change your whole mindset, so then I stopped thinking in terms of me and started thinking in a bigger and broader sense in terms of us.

Many of the student research participants reflected back on particular courses and professors that epitomized the opening of their minds and worlds and the commitment to social justice/social change activism that they associate with WEP. These experiences run the gamut – from a community organizing class to labor studies to political science to economics. Collectively, students mention being awed

and inspired by learning about the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire, the role of Disney in globalization, the plight of domestic workers in New York City. Lisa comments, “Talk about being out of the box, every single professor taught out of the box.”

Phyllis explains,

...in the first semester, in my undergrad, we had to go to a demonstration for what was it? Against Disney, a demonstration at the 42 St. store and we had to go out there and interview people and it was something else, cause I never did that. I don't think I have ever been politically active and it was just very interesting to interview people and sit there and see how they see things... And the media class, when you take the media class. I did not know these things. I watch television all the time, and I'm like, I was not making the connections. And now, you're able to make the connections and you are able to see so clearly. It's just amazing.

Lisa described taking labor law and realizing that people fought for the rights she and others enjoy today. She recalls her fear in taking Economics, terrified it would involve math only to find herself captivated to learn about U.S. imperialism and globalization.

Ivy devotes an entire section of her memoir – seven typed pages – to a detailed description of one community organizing course she took at WEP that was taught by two experienced social justice activists. She writes,

What this course did for a neophyte like myself was provide detailed guidance and training to no longer feel immobile but to challenge myself to get on the front line. With their encouragement, I was learning to become a social activist, to participate rather than stand idly by.

Through this class, she becomes incensed at the treatment of domestic workers, is inspired to attend her first anti-war demonstration, and begins to understand the difference between volunteerism – something she's done her whole life – and social change activism.

Out of all the classes I have taken over a lifetime, this course greatly assisted me in finding direction in my life. What I mean is it has unearthed many of my own passions and beliefs, helped me to finally connect with other individuals who have the same beliefs. This may sound facile, but it is incredibly reassuring to discover that others feel the same way as I do... that my instincts are correct.

Having worked all her adult life in the business world, Ivy emerges from the isolation she has always felt as an idealistic, compassionate person, someone who puts people over profits, to find a social justice oriented community at WEP. She wrote,

I've participated in several activities such as protests and picket lines, went to Albany to lobby, volunteer teaching, and even contributed to writing a platform proposal in opposition to expanding the NAFTA treaty. And you know what, I truly enjoyed them all... It is true that you can influence others to do the right thing once they have been informed. The little victories count such as when at one event a person pulled his friends out of an expensive restaurant who were already seated when he has seen signs stating how little the kitchen staff makes. These small triumphs do help spur the movement.

College at WEP also made Carmen a more critical thinker. A paper she wrote on the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, for example, led her to critique her own educational experiences, to understand the role of tracking in perpetuating racial segregation in schools. Her exposure to feminism through a women's studies course also touched the way in which she's choosing to raise her daughters.

For Phyllis, education at WEP was a source of critical consciousness-raising on many levels – from the role of education in society to the public policies that affect her place of work. She claims that she did not really see “the bigger picture” of federal, state, and city welfare reform policies that so deeply affect the work her agency carries out until she got her education at WEP.

From Learning to En/acting Social Change

Not every WEP student has the latent values and beliefs Ivy does, nor the time to take up the challenge of becoming an activist. But, some do – and they enact their social justice commitments in a diversity of ways and to varying degrees. These students exemplify the transformative power of education and underscore the importance of schools as sites of possibility.

Sandra is a prime example, among my research participants, of how WEP course content, her housing situation, and her previous beliefs interact to impart a deeply meaningful lesson in education for social change. Sandra becomes a tenant organizer using what she learned at WEP to challenge and change deteriorating conditions in the building in which she lived. As a housing activist, she writes,

I attended meetings with the landlord and represented tenants in meetings with federal, state, and city officials. I participated in letter writing campaigns, gathered signatures for petitions, held meetings in my home, delivered public speeches, and supported housing legislation. It got to the place where I felt like the poster child for housing decay.

Deborah brought strong social justice beliefs, rooted in her faith as an evangelical Christian, to WEP. She sees her college education as part of what will enable her to pursue her spiritual mission in life “to serve community and humanity to the best of my ability,” and she reflects on the ways in which specific courses – one on domestic violence, for example – helped her to understand the issues that affect the people to whom she ministers. Deborah teaches at a theological school associated with her church, is a volunteer hospital and prison chaplain, works per diem for foster care services, and anticipates becoming a missionary in Africa at a church school upon her retirement. While Deborah’s analysis of the root causes of the social

problems she ministers to may differ from those of her professors at WEP, she is actively engaged in her community. She concludes her memoir crediting her education at WEP, “It is time to put this knowledge to work. So I shall go forth into the community, organizing and sharing the wealth of knowledge that I have received.”

Phyllis also sees herself enacting her social consciousness/social change commitments through the ministry as she is currently attending a theological seminary. She sees deep parallels between her urban studies major at WEP and what she is learning in theology school. Phyllis is proud to note that she is way ahead of her theology classmates in understanding the issues that affect urban ministries. Nelly lives out her social justice beliefs through her church as well; her college education has equipped her to write the church newsletter.

Lisa has used her position at work, and her involvement in a community education organization, to sponsor a job fair for public assistance recipients in Harlem. She credits her college education with making her feel capable of taking on a project that will benefit others.

Deborah, and a group of students in her community organizing class, also put their social change energies to work on a project intended to improve WEP. She believes that some specific changes were made in the way the program operates in response to their activism and organizing. She hoped that this initiative would result in an active student government at WEP, but that has proved difficult to sustain given the student population of working adults.

Several of my research participants seek career changes (some after retiring from their civil service jobs) in which they will put their education and their values to work at the service of their communities. Their search for a “fulfilling career” is one way they seek to live out the values and knowledge they gained at WEP (described more fully in chapter 3).

Limits of Education for Social Change

For so many of my student research participants knowing what to *do* with the knowledge gained at WEP remained a significant challenge. In this section, I explore the multiple and varied constraints to enacting education for social change at WEP. From a lack of clarity over program mission to the difficulties of making change in large and entrenched institutions to struggle over funding and allocation of resources, I consider the barriers – both large and small – to social change education. While many of these constraints are clearly beyond the scope of the program and reflect the larger dilemmas of tackling social change work in our society, others illuminate the challenges that small social justice education programs confront as they attempt to educate students against the tide.

Understanding Program Mission and Curriculum

This research revealed a deep and troubling lack of awareness, on the part of many of my research participants, of the program’s mission. Most of the faculty and staff I interviewed acknowledged that the program spent very little time discussing what WEP’s mission is or ought to be. One instructor states outright, “There is not too much thought given to the mission of WEP...there is no vision about education.” Thus, most instructors and staff substituted their personal visions for worker

education in the absence of a clearly articulated mission for WEP. An instructor explains,

in the absence of the sense of mission, I try to bring my own idea of what the mission of worker education should be... to get workers to have certain literacies – social, political, economic literacies. Like Paulo Freire said, they should have the ability to read the world...so social change and social justice and those kinds of things, to me, that is part of the package of what education should do for the worker.

He is convinced that, “Professors don’t step into the classroom and teach according to the mission, they teach according to their own goals and philosophy. They don’t care about the mission...”

One staff person articulated WEP’s mission as keeping the theme of social justice alive, albeit imperfectly. She acknowledged, “I think we keep the theme alive. But, I don’t think we do it satisfactorily... we don’t follow up adequately.”

My student research participants were even less clear about WEP’s social justice and social change agenda, labor-friendly curriculum, and urban and labor studies majors. Specifically, many of my student research participants had little understanding, prior to enrolling, of what it meant to be a student in this union-supported worker education program. April’s deep desire to simply be in college underlies her lack of information and vague understanding of the program. She explains,

At that point [before entering], I didn’t know anything about the program’s orientation. I think the whole thing was, [another student] was my friend and ... I knew she wouldn’t get me into something that wasn’t good for me. So, for me, it wasn’t about knowing about the program. The key thing was to start college, or not to start college.

Ivy describes her entree into WEP, which had nothing to do with an interest in urban or labor studies.

I came here really by accident. There were two CUNY programs in the building... I got rejected by the other one and, I don't know, somehow I came up here for some reason, I can't exactly recall why...and I talked to one of the counselors and she said she'd help me apply.

Phyllis explains her initial reticence about enrolling in a program that focused exclusively on urban (and labor) studies.

I was like, do I really want to do this urban studies? And [my husband] was like, what do you care? Get the BA degree! And, I was like, what is urban studies anyway? I didn't even understand what the topics were gonna be about. But, it was interesting and I was like, okay.

Brenda simply says, "I didn't know that it was just urban studies. I didn't know that."

Other research participants still seemed unclear about what it meant to be an urban studies major even as they neared graduation. Florence acknowledged, "Most of them [the students] are ready to graduate by the time they realize what's going on."

Although April has only a couple semesters left to complete her degree, she admits,

To be honest, the urban studies thing has not become totally clear to me as yet. Because sometimes I do think I understand it and sometimes I think I don't understand it. Some people you ask them, what is urban studies and what does an urban studies degree entail, where could you work? And they rattle it off for you and I can't. Because I don't think I fully understand what it is all about.

April is not alone in this sentiment, particularly in terms of her lack of clarity about the employment potential of the degree. WEP, like many adult education programs, assumes that students bring a wealth of life experience to school with them and, in many ways, the heart and soul of the urban studies curriculum is designed to build upon the life and work experience of native New Yorkers. The growing minority of West Indian, and other immigrant, students in the program often lack this base of experiential knowledge upon which the urban studies curriculum is grounded.

April explains how her (overlooked) immigrant status added another layer of distance and potential misunderstanding between students and the program curriculum.

It was difficult because when the word urban [was used], I didn't really understand or pay attention to the word until I came here. Everything is urbanized here, it's urban this and urban that. In Trinidad, we don't really use it...Being in class with a lot of native New Yorkers and Americans talking about urbanization, it was kind of difficult to get it.

While the native New Yorkers among my research participants may have entered the program unaware of its labor and urban studies orientation, the program's goals and intentions, unsurprisingly, often fit better with their experiences and objectives. William, for example, was a union shop steward prior to entering the WEP, and found the social change orientation of the program to his liking despite the fact that he knew little about it prior to enrolling.

...I didn't know that [WEP tries to connect education to social change] going in. But, that was one of the reasons I returned to school. I was like, this guy isn't doing the right thing, if I was there, if I was in office, I would. So I said, let me try and get some credentials and see if I can, and even though I have been a little disillusioned with a lot of politics, at the time I said, let me just learn how this process works, how you get on the ballot. And then I found out that the school was tailor made for that type of studying that I wanted to do. This was right up my alley...

Conversely, at least one of my student research participants found that he began to question his facile understanding of the program's curriculum and orientation, the longer he was in the program. Given that he completed both his BA and MA at WEP, Samuel had ample time to understand what the program was about and to evolve a healthy critique of its mission and practice. Samuel says that the longer he was in the program, the more questions arose for him, and his fellow students, as to the value and purpose of an urban studies degree.

There were more questions if anything as time went on, questions such as: Well, what is an urban studies degree and how could that apply in the labor force? And basically no one gave me a concrete answer other than perhaps public service. But, in what capacity? It was very generic.

Samuel explained that while he felt he experienced fragments of critical consciousness through different courses, it took years for him to make sense of the cumulative impact and meaning of the whole program and degree.

Conservative Environment and Lack of Support for Social Change Activism

Several of my research participants remarked upon the conservative environment in which they live and the lack of support in their lives for the critical thought and commitment to social justice and social change they were exposed to at WEP. Sandra describes how she sees the conservative environment impact on people.

...it's easy to blame people, but in most cases people want to do good. Nobody is born to want to do bad, people want to do good. But, there's something in the environment that prevents that and this is what we have to try and change...

Lisa echoes this sentiment explaining,

...we live in a society that doesn't fight for what we believe in... We live in a country that is very manipulated and while there are a lot of people who have enough gumption to speak out, they're not applauded. People don't give them their props.

My research participants not only describe an overall political and social environment that is increasingly conservative, but a specific lack of support on the part of their family, friends, and co-workers for social change activism. The messages about social justice they receive at WEP are at odds with the overall context in which most of them live.

Ivy describes what she calls a "Darwinian" immigrant mentality among her family members of looking out for one's personal advancement at the expense of

concern for community or society. She hopes to buck this trend, but social pressure within her community and family to conform is quite strong. These cultural values, as well as financial imperatives, lead her to consider “helping” professions such as teaching as an intermediary location between the business world and full-time employment as a community activist. Ivy explains her isolation, “Besides going to these organizations [she connected with through the community organizing class], there is no one that I personally know who is involved [in social change activism]. They think I am nuts, even my [identical twin] sister.”

Carmen also reflects on the limits to what she can take home from WEP without it leading to unwanted domestic strife.

“...And then, on the other hand, my fiancé is very patriotic. There, we are two different beings and I also had to come to a place, well you know I am not going to be living with my politics and there are a lot of other areas he satisfies... I don't bring up certain things because I know it wouldn't be productive and at times I do speak my point of view, but if it comes to getting into an argument over political views, no...”

WEP students recognize that they need both personal and institutional support to take up the enormous challenge of becoming social change activists. They are acutely aware of the limits their daily lives, and in some cases, their loved ones, place upon their living out their social justice values.

Definitions of Social Change and Agency

My research also uncovered a surprising lack of specificity with which my participants spoke about social change. It appears that the program lacks a common working definition of what social change means and that students, faculty, and staff are, at times, using the same language to express very different things.

Some of my student research participants seemed to use the words social change as synonymous with individual social mobility. They appeared to believe that the benefits education brings to families constitutes a form of social change. This notion that social change can happen at the individual level, with the benefits of education trickling down to family and community, is not really contested by the program. Nor is an alternate conception of social change, as collective and structural, clearly articulated despite the active participation of many faculty and staff members in various large scale social movements.

Much in the way faculty substitute their own vision of the mission of worker education in the absence of a well articulated one on the part of WEP, several of my student research participants substitute their own understandings of social change/social justice to fill the void left by the program. Deborah, for one, is clear that she and WEP have different definitions of social change.

I knew it [the program] was about social change... but I wasn't committed one way or the other, whether it was to get me to adapt to their idea of social change or to get them to adapt to mine. But, it was a challenge. And I think it worked both ways.

These differing definitions of social change reflect both differences in conceptions of the purpose of education, as well as vastly different beliefs about individual agency, on the part of students, faculty, and staff. To envision education as about transforming social structures, and the world we live in, seems grandiose for women and men who are unsure they can transform even their own lives. Many WEP students simply lack the self-confidence to think of themselves as actors in an arena beyond their own immediate lives. College, at WEP, can be key to transforming

students' sense of their own human agency and, thus, their potential as social change agents.

William, who became involved in the Working Families party, connects the surge in self-confidence that allowed him to fully participate as an activist, to his education at WEP. He says,

...WEP prepared me for that. It gave me the confidence to speak and put my ideas out there and contribute without feeling that, because there was a time when I probably would have sat there and been a part of it and not thought that my ideas were good enough or that I would present them as so. Just being [at WEP] gave me the ability to be able to do that.

Vehicles for Social Change: Unions and Workplaces

My research participants reveal that the program is not, by and large, successful in exposing students to the vehicles and mechanisms of social change activism in such a way that most students feel they can easily integrate this kind of activity into their lives – even when they desire it. Of all my student research participants, only Sandra was sure how to parlay the education she received at WEP into activism after graduation, as a tenant organizer.

Samuel's action research and the worker education and social change project revealed an intense desire on the part of WEP students for field work placements and internship opportunities that would provide them with alternative models for careers, or volunteer work, in social justice organizations. Samuel's research even generated the idea of starting a WEP-sponsored social change job fair or job placement process for its graduates. He is clear that students must leave the program with strong social justice networks if they are to remain engaged and active after graduation. Providing students with a clear vision of the mechanisms of social change activism, as much as

an awareness of social issues, must be incorporated into the curriculum so that enacting social change becomes a natural progression when students are out on their own, Samuel says.

As a worker education program, WEP implicitly and, at times explicitly, posits the students' unions and workplaces as the likely sites in which they may carry out social justice activism. But, most of my research participants believe that these institutions are, in fact, deeply challenging places in which to attempt to enact change. Rather than bang their heads against the wall in these large and entrenched institutions, most of my research participants chose to invest their energies in making individual level changes in their families and communities or doing social justice work through their churches. One instructor reflects on the irony of this contradiction,

...it was certainly not an immediate or obvious conclusion to students that the union is a relevant part of the picture. And that was one of my struggles. I had come in thinking it would be and then I was kind of like, wow! It really isn't at all. So I need to figure out why it isn't and what is and if there isn't a 'something' then what do I do about it if there's not an obvious path.

Another faculty person claims that “[WEP] celebrates unions rather than critically looks at them.” Still another instructor concurs, “the thing the unions are not going to do well on is using [education] to promote change within the union.”

A union staff person states that of the three goals he believes are the foundation of worker education – for union members to learn more about labor history, to receive skills training to become union leaders, and as a service to members – WEP accomplishes only the third. Though this union staff person would like participation in WEP to help union members recognize that knowledge is the

foundation for power building in the workplace and to develop leadership within the union, he says that this has not panned out.

Another staff person argues that while the WEP is “not just another adult program” neither is it truly organically connected to the labor movement. She guesstimates, based on years of experience in the program, that 10 – 15% of WEP students are engaged either in union or community activism. The fact that there is no tracking of student activism is, in itself, telling.

Lisa, like many of my research participants, sees unions as not doing much for their members. She is disappointed by recent contracts for municipal workers, and by the tiny wage increases unions have gained for public sector employees. Ivy argues,

My thing is that social change, I don't equate it with unionism... the union members bitch and moan about the union, they don't feel positive about their union...most of the students are very critical...

Deborah is the most vocal of my research participants about the lack of potential for social change through her union. She says,

...the only good thing [the union] has done for me is pay for me to go to college. As far as the union reps and representation at [my workplace] – it's a total joke. The union reps are told what to do by management... whenever you attempt to do something on behalf of the members, the senior rep takes over and buries it... no one has ever had the courage to sue the union.

Deborah claims that the union elections are “bogus” so she has stopped going to meetings and participating in elections. She says that she has spoken to union officials and gotten no support. While this perception of the union may be extreme, Deborah is not alone in her sense that members have little opportunity to influence the direction of the unions to which they pay their dues.

Though the urban studies curriculum posits the city agencies in which students work as venues for social change, few of my student research participants believe that their workplaces are propitious places in which to affect change of any kind. Much of the later sections of Phyllis' memoir focus on the rampant nepotism she sees within the civil service sector (its impact on her job mobility is described in detail in chapter 3). Despite graduating with a BA and MA from WEP, she continues to work as a secretary and is thwarted in her advancement by the very structures (union and city government) the program posits students can change using the knowledge and skills they garner while pursuing their degrees. Phyllis described her place of employment as a modern "plantation" in which "people trade off their morals and values for upward mobility and others stand around and watch as they saw the injustice." When she tried to activate the union on her behalf she claims she was labeled a "troublemaker." Sandra concurs that the city agency where she works is a problematic place in which to attempt to enact social change and, most definitely, not a "merit system."

Samuel is both vocal and articulate in his critique of this aspect of the program and even conducted an action research project his last semester at WEP to examine the relationship between the program and his union. He says, "...I thought there was a structural flaw in the partnership [between WEP and the unions and the city agencies]..." This inspired him to focus his research on the connections between these entities and how students might better utilize their educations at WEP both for career advancement within the city agencies and to influence the direction of the unions to which they belong.

Nelly, like many others, simply looks elsewhere to enact the social justice aspect of the WEP curriculum through her involvement with her church which runs a program to feed the homeless.

This lack of an obvious path for students' social change desires is crucial in undermining the transformative potential of the program. Any desire to make transformative action an integral part of the educational experience is thwarted by the unyielding nature of the institutions towards which the program – implicitly or explicitly – directs students. The most motivated of students turn instead to the outlets that are most familiar and accessible to them to live out their social justice commitments – family, church, and community.

Although Carmen is a labor studies major and articulates a dream of writing about labor issues for a working class audience, she, like many WEP graduates, is unclear exactly how to put the critical consciousness she gained in college to work. Carmen is blunt in acknowledging that the breach between critical consciousness and activism is often a large one. She states,

...I would say that the program did not accomplish its [social change] goals in me. One of my desires and wishes would be to write to people outside of academia about class consciousness, but I don't know if I will pursue that. But, that would be my way of being an activist, through that.

Additionally, the vast majority of students in the program choose to major in urban, not, labor studies. While this has much to do with students' desire to gain a degree with potential for mobility, it also reflects the current state of the U.S. labor movement and students' deep sense of distance from, and in some cases dissatisfaction with, their own unions. When Carmen suggests that those students who pursued a major in labor studies – a tiny minority of the overall WEP student

population – gained more of a sense of class consciousness than the majority of students who opted to major in urban studies, she reveals an important disconnect between the curriculum the majority of students are exposed to and the positioning of their unions as the likely vehicles for social change activism. She argues that as a worker education program the labor studies component – and thus, the critical consciousness raising potential – ought to have been stronger.

Although questions of race are a central component of WEP's urban studies curriculum – so much so that a common complaint among students was that excessive focus on race in their classes made the curriculum repetitious – activism and organizing around issues of race and ethnicity were somehow absent from the program agenda in any explicit or productive way. Gillian revealed how the raced nature of the urban studies curriculum may, ironically, have served to discourage student activism and organizing by focusing on the problems urban blacks confront rather than proposing or promoting solutions. She explains,

Urban studies is, one of my friends at Columbia who is also an urban studies major said that urban studies is white bad, black poor. And after a while, hearing it over and over again, you feel defeated.

It appears that much of the (predominantly white) faculty at WEP were unsure how to invigorate discussions of race into outlets for social change organizing. One white faculty member who, like many of his peers, was attracted to teach in the program because of its labor orientation is frank in acknowledging his shortcomings in facilitating action-oriented critical analysis on issues of race at WEP, despite his commitment to socially transformative education.

...in a discussion that opened into class, and explored class, my strengths and experience and my ability to facilitate a common dialogue with students were

up to the task. In a discussion that opened into race, I would be less effective and it would be harder to teach. The links to action would also be more difficult to make together than if class and work were the themes, where I could easily draw on my resources and be helpful and informative.

A desire to get outside the constraints of a black-white urban studies dichotomy – “to avoid the tired scenario of a white teacher making students of color read Toni Morrison (again) and talk about race” in the words of this instructor – may have led some faculty to, unintentionally, underestimate, or avoid entirely, the galvanizing potential of race in their classes.

Finally, simply being a student at WEP offers some students the contact with critical discourses and engagement with ideas that run counter to the mainstream that many activists get from their involvement with social change activism. Thus, there is a displacement that happens where education provides students the fulfillment they might get from activism and also takes up what little time working adults have for unpaid social change activities. This contradiction is rarely acknowledged or addressed explicitly in the program.

Complexities of Critical Consciousness

Several of my research participants expressed anger and sadness as a result of the critical pedagogies they experienced in their classes at WEP. Rather than spurring them to activism, contact with progressive ideas and ideologies made them feel angry, guilty, and unsure of where to focus their passion. Anderson (1986) notes a similar reaction to liberatory pedagogies among the adult women “re-entry” college students she studied.

The critical pedagogy Carmen encountered in some of her courses, particularly those she took as a labor studies major, provoked anger and upset in her.

In a section of her memoir aptly entitled, “America You Lied”, she writes,

One of the harshest lessons I learned in college related to some ugly truths about America. The historical accounts taught to most of us during the first twelve years of our education are either sugarcoated or half-truths. College has taught me more accurate versions... I was enraged and appalled [to learn] about a history that was tainted with dishonesty, exploitation and slaughter all for the purpose of capitalism (read greed).

Carmen then reels off a list of historical events in which the underlying motivations for US policy were less than pure and she ends this section of her memoir reflecting on her own discomfort with these truths.

For a long time, my rage was focused against America. How could I feel respect toward a country that victimizes its own people, and also exploits, manipulates, and destroys other countries for its own economic benefit?... I did not like the animosity I felt toward my country. For my own peace, I had to diffuse those feelings.

She says, “...I was faced with this guilt of, ‘I don’t have time to be an activist! I don’t have the energy!’ And I needed to personally resolve that guilt because I found that was my responsibility.” As a single mother with full-time employment, Carmen resolves the “guilt” she feels as a result of critical consciousness raised through her studies at WEP in this way:

...I think one of the things I justify, and justification is not always a good thing, my contribution to this world is going to be my kids and I’m going to try and mold them the best I can... I know that’s lame, but...as it is now I have more time, but I just don’t have the energy to get involved.

Rosa writes that she “...had another ‘intellectual growth spurt’ at WEP. I became more aware of the need for community activism, the fact that we must not remain complacent for there is still much work to be done.” Yet, Rosa struggles after

graduating from WEP and leaving NYC with “how to carry this thinking beyond graduation.” In the conservative social and political context into which she has relocated, she seems unable to find an outlet for her social justice/social change beliefs and commitments beyond being a role model for her large and multi-generational family. She writes,

I feel rather frustrated because I know what is wrong, the reasons why, but I am not involved in changing things. I feel like an outsider looking in...At times I feel guilty, as if I have betrayed my education and my union.

She concludes her memoir with this sobering question, revealing the limits of education for social change: “So life goes on after education. Everyday I learn something new which of course I share with my family, but what am I doing to change things?”

Despite eye-opening experiences with social change activism, Ivy is also unsure, on the cusp of her graduation from WEP, how to translate this energy and enthusiasm into a career for social change.

Phyllis reflects upon a conversation she had with a clerk in a radical bookstore that illuminated many of the contradictions of her education at WEP.

I think some people like to remain in the dark. Because once you get the knowledge, then you have to ask yourself, what are you going to do with it...What am I supposed to do with all this knowledge when I’m finished? She [clerk in liberation bookstore] said, you are supposed to take a stand, whether it be pro or con. You have to take a stand. And I thought that was so profound. Because that’s one of the things I learned [at WEP].

Yet, Phyllis remains unsure exactly how to take such a stand. She reflects on her education at WEP and acknowledges that attaining critical consciousness can be painful. Phyllis wrote in her memoir,

I think it was my last semester as an undergrad and... it was like a sadness in my spirit. Cause I really wanted to believe that education was going to open the doors to a career, but it was also, like I wrote in my memoir, knowledge and wisdom is painful.

Nevertheless, Phyllis expresses gratitude to have the knowledge and awareness she gained through her education. She says, "I can see the picture a whole lot clearer... by the same token, I would not trade it [her college education] in. If somebody said, Phyllis, you can go back and give up your BA and your masters, not me. I'd rather keep the truth."

Sandra reflects on how the program impacts on students differently and attributes this disparity to divergences in beliefs and values they entered the program with. She remarked, "I would say that the classes I took, they affected me. But, I would listen to other people talk and they weren't getting it." She explains,

What this [education at WEP] did was just enhance what was already there because I've always really been that type of person. They used to call me deep. But, I've always been the type of person that looked for the reason, why is this like this? There has to be a reason. But, I know for a fact that a lot of other people go through this program and it just never [adds up].

Sandra goes on to describe a discussion of gentrification in an urban housing policy class and her difference in view points with a classmate who lived just around the corner from her. "It's just amazing how people process things differently. She wanted to live in Stuyvesant Heights, so that's where she lived. I live in Bed-Stuy," she recalled with irony. Sandra is very clear about the limits of knowledge to change a person's outlook on the world. She explains,

I think my life experience is just as important as my education and I think that my spiritual journey is even more important than my education. I mean I like knowing what I know, but without the right mindset to do something with what you know, then what you know is nothing.

Samuel agrees with Sandra that WEP engaged, or heightened, ideas and values that were already his, but were submerged. What education at WEP did was allow them to surface and take shape.

Well, that I think [WEP] has done for me is I think there were certain things that were already embedded inside of me in terms of trying to help people, case in point, what I was trying to do with the volunteer work [as a coach]. I mean that wasn't because anybody coerced me, it was because I like working with kids...that was already within me. Now when I came into this program I saw how it relates to three different areas: social, economic, and political. And I felt it kind of brought everything together. Coming into this program I didn't care for politics, I didn't like the propaganda so I kind of tried not to get involved. But then as a result of taking a political science class and seeing how it is all inter-related... that shaped my focus.

Thus, there is a haphazard quality to whether or not students in the program get inspired by WEP's social justice and social change message or not. It appears to have more to do with their own predilections and the circumstances of their lives than any systematic effort on the part of the program.

Furthermore, it is an inherent, and ironic, contradiction that many students who have opted to invest their time and energy in higher education have, to some extent or other, accepted the myth of education for individual, not collective, mobility. One instructor reflects that, "the people who were strongly motivated to be [at WEP] were motivated by class mobility, job mobility to begin with, and 9 times out of 10 class mobility as the overarching objective." For him, mobility desires proved to be one of the biggest constraints in attempting to implement critical pedagogy at WEP. "Ideally, you'd like a world in which people didn't want class mobility because then they would want some kind of glorious liberation of workers as workers."

That WEP does not offer students a coherent substitute for this mythology, or concrete models for social change activism, is a serious limitation. This instructor notes,

one of the problems at WEP is that there doesn't yet exist a kind of coherent workable alternative to the dominant ideology among students which is this mobility credential meritocracy kind of thing and that ideology is extremely potent to people because it is so tenuous, that's why it is so important. People grab onto it like hell, because it's not sturdy....there's a certain desperation in that mobility thing and there's a problem if as a teacher you want to come and get people off this ideological track which is a real obstacle to people thinking critically...And yet, what are you doing?! You want to knock somebody off this thing they've worked like hell to get a hold of? And what are you offering in return? You've got to have a whole lot of answers, you know what I mean, on a practical level.

Thus, faced with a lack of specific strategies for transforming critical consciousness into social action, students' responses to critical pedagogies turned inward collapsing into guilt and frustration. With the exception of those few students whose life circumstances, and prior beliefs, presented them with concrete options for social justice activism, WEP students were thwarted in imagining creative, vigorous outlets for the critical consciousness they gained through their studies.

Resources

Struggle over resources is a fundamental constraint to the work of WEP and to enacting education for social change as well. Dependence upon "soft money" (that must be lobbied for and re-approved on a yearly basis) contributes to what one faculty member calls "boosterism" at WEP. He argues that it is difficult for the program to engage in critical reflection when it is under budgetary scrutiny year to year. A long-time staff person reiterates the sense that the program's institutional vulnerability precludes essential critical reflection and a clear articulation of its mission.

Internal allocation of resources is also seen as a primary constraint by some WEP faculty and staff. They believe that the academic program is treated as a “stepchild” by the larger office of worker education at the college and that, therefore, the program is not a priority for internal allocation of funds. One staff member expresses this sense of internal injustice saying, “...we are underappreciated and we feel like stepchildren and we don’t receive the credits that are due for keeping this program going.” She feels that the attitude on the part of the higher-ups is that as long as the academic program has “... just the bare minimum, as long as we have that, we should be okay.”

Another staff person, in describing the relationship of the academic program to the overall office of worker education, which includes a labor think-tank dedicated to research and scholarship on labor issues, comments, “we’re like the girls, and they’re the guys.” It is ironic that worker education at the college appears to be replicating the traditional divide in academia wherein scholarship and publication are awarded status and resources over learning and teaching.

Although most of the faculty I interviewed were dedicated to teaching and their students, many felt pulled in other directions – either by their social change activism or the priorities of academia. One instructor argues that the real work of socially conscious academics is not in the classroom.

If you’re a left researcher researching US poverty... you’re doing all this work that has policy implications about how horrible everybody is to the poor and you write a book about it and you can say what you really think and you’re tirelessly pursuing that agenda in a variety of different ways, it’s much more interesting than banging your head up against the wall about what’s going on in classrooms.

Thus, not only does lack of resources impact on material conditions at WEP, it hinders the deep and honest self-reflection that is an essential foundation for critical education.

Remediation

Changes in CUNY's admission and remediation policies, specifically the 1999 decision to eliminate remediation at all four year colleges, have had a deep impact on WEP and its students. As I previously noted, the majority of my student research participants required remediation, in either math or writing, upon their admission to WEP. Thus, these smart, eloquent, dedicated students could not have pursued their degrees had they applied to the program several years later.

The director of worker education argues that there has been a "sea change" in CUNY since the worker education program's initial affiliation with the college in terms of admissions and remediation policies. At that time, worker education students were exempt from some of the admissions and graduation requirements imposed upon traditional students at CUNY's four year colleges. This has slowly been chipped away at and now worker education students have to fulfill all the standard admissions and graduation requirements of the college. Caroline, the program counselor, articulates the impact of this policy.

Every time you turn around there are new requirements for admissions for undergrad students. They're more stringent, the tests are harder. So, it has put a damper on the amount of students we can bring in any one semester.... If you have an open house and you have 25 people in that open house, maybe 2 or 3 can have everything done previously and it's easy to get through. The majority of them will need to take the [CUNY admissions] tests...

Both the former and current directors of WEP concur with Caroline's assessment. The former director describes the wide-reaching impact changes in

CUNY remediation and admissions policy have on the program. Not only do the new policies keep potential students out, they impact curricular coherency for matriculated students as well. In such a small program as WEP, the tiny number of new students makes it very challenging to offer students the courses they need in the most appropriate sequence. She explains the predicament WEP finds itself in.

Last fall [2003] we had 7 new undergraduates... it's obvious that's about structural obstacles. I think a lot of it is remediation. Sixty-five people entered the pre-college classes⁷, preparing for the [CUNY] entrance exams, so that's where the new undergraduates would come from...

This disparity in numbers – sixty-five students enrolling in preparatory classes versus seven in the undergraduate program – reveals the deep impact CUNY's stringent testing criteria has had on the program's ability to attract new students.

Yet, changes in remediation policy at the university do more than exclude individual students and constrain the daily life of the program. By creating a permanent crisis in recruitment at WEP, one in which staff feel they are operating under siege and in fear of failure, this policy blunts the possibility of critique and imagination. Staff's time and attention are diverted from envisioning and enacting education that is transformative and rigorous to concern for the program's survival.

Education for Credential vs. Education for Critical Consciousness

At WEP, and elsewhere in our credential-oriented society, prospective students are much more interested in degrees with high market value rather than in liberal arts programs (Aronowitz, 2000). This is particularly true at WEP where students are limited to choosing between two liberal arts majors – urban or labor

⁷ One full time skills development instructor, funded by a consortium of labor unions, teaches all the remedial skills classes for students who would like to apply to the program but are ineligible under the new CUNY admissions criteria.

studies. The director of worker education is quite frank in acknowledging that “students come to us in large part because they want a degree...they don’t come to us because the curriculum says we are going to prepare you to become advocates in your union and your community.”

Although the director says he values liberal arts education for workers, the perpetual crunch on new undergraduate students, combined with a push on the part of the unions for more vocational programs for their members, has led the office of worker education to sponsor certificate programs that attempt to meld vocational and liberal arts education. Whether this represents a potentially vital new model for worker education or a capitulation to market forces remains to be seen. A staff person described these changes as both “a challenge and a worry.” She spoke passionately of the beauty of liberal arts education and the importance of workers’ intellectual development and expressed concern that an increase in vocationally and professionally oriented worker education programs could cause the liberal arts program to “drift.”

Yet, every faculty person I interviewed, and many students as well, spoke passionately about the importance of liberal arts education, especially for working class students – those so often denied a thinking education. One adjunct instructor reflects on the value of liberal arts education and its connection to education for social change. He muses,

I really like and respect the whole academic side of things and I think there is something really important about disinterested education...that has that open ended quality to it, that is almost like free association... For me, really, it’s sort of key to the whole self-determination side. I can’t shut down or restrict the horizon of what the learning is going to be about...

He reflects on the importance of liberal arts education to his own political and personal development.

In my own development, that kind of education [liberal arts education] was *crucial*...I couldn't think about that stuff [politics] if I also hadn't been able to think about poetry and a million other things.

A former director spoke of her effort to improve the quality of humanities courses at WEP because she believed students would not be exposed to that kind of learning elsewhere and it seemed, to her, that a college education should include the study of literature and art. The current director seconds this notion explaining that, in her mind, college is the place for exploring big ideas not vocational training. A long-time staff person underscores this belief arguing that education at WEP should never be tied solely to a career ladder, but must remain an intellectually enriching experience for students – despite their strong mobility desires.

Yet, several program staff people expressed concern that the larger structural forces that affect the direction of higher education nationally could have a devastating impact on a tiny program like WEP. The former director wondered aloud whether it might be better to close the program “with dignity” than to see it inalterably changed. WEP's struggle to retain the primacy of liberal arts education is at the core of the educational and philosophical challenges the program confronts. How it resolves the many tensions inherent in these choices will be instructive for other higher education institutions and programs striving to provide non-traditional students a rich and critical education.

Conclusion

WEP is a small program struggling against the tide, sometimes against itself. As this chapter reveals, the program could do many things differently to enhance the social justice and social change potential of students' educational experience. Yet, it is important to pause and reflect on the value of education at WEP given the overall climate in which unions and workers, urban public universities, and progressive social movements currently find themselves. This research makes evident that going against the grain does matter, that keeping the theme of education for social change alive is significant, though not sufficient, in these cynical, conservative times. The real challenge is to deepen and advance WEP's commitment to education for social justice and social change in the years to come.

Chapter 8

Reflections on a Research Journey: Writing the Personal as Research

Trying to look at schools that actually work is so complex, it feels as if we need a new vocabulary in which to research and write the stories of how educational spaces – imperfectly, incompletely, in a fledgling way – attempt to provide students with a critical education that also gives them the credentials they need to live in this world... (Field note, 5/20/04)

Research Journey

Despite the many features of education at WEP that I highlight in this dissertation – small classes, the opportunity to teach the same students over time, pedagogy that lifts up students’ experiences and voices – the underlying urge behind this research stemmed from my desire to understand more deeply and fully what a college education meant to my students. While engaged in the collaborative enterprise of moving adult students towards their degrees – and all the hard work this implies on everyone’s part – I’d assumed a mutuality of purpose as to what college means and why my students wanted an education. That we were partners in this journey towards a college education is what seemed most important and governed my relationships with students over the many years I was their teacher. But, I also had questions, creeping doubts, worries, that I pushed to the back of my mind, fully occupied by the awesome undertaking of helping academically under-prepared students attain their college degrees.

Graduate school, and the researching and writing of this dissertation, provided me with the space to consider more fully and deeply some of these questions: Why *did* WEP students return to school when their ability to activate their degrees for professional mobility was so remote? And, more significantly, why did they stay?

What brought these students to college as adults and how did their previous schooling impact on their current educational experiences? What did they make of the importance of this alternative educational space to their academic success? And, more troubling to me, did the students share my vision of education as personally and socially transformative? Did they see the classroom as a place to develop critical consciousness? Did they share my goal of education for social change? If not, what did they make of WEP's labor orientation and politically progressive curriculum and critical pedagogy? And, finally, how might the transformative potential of the program be more fully realized if I engaged my research participants in writing their educational memoirs as research method? Out of these overarching concerns, worries, and wonderings, I developed my original research questions and process.

Yet, these initial questions (elaborated in chapter 2) never felt entirely right. Both too broad and not big enough, they reflect my struggle, as a teacher, to engage more deeply with my students about what their college educations meant to them. In a field note late in the year I collected the bulk of my data, I reflected:

I no longer feel like my working research questions work. The data I am collecting, that students are offering me, does not really, fully answer those questions. Yet, it goes beyond them. What do I think I am finding???

(5/20/04)

Fortunately, for me, as a former writing teacher, I also set out to explore what it meant to use the writing of memoir by research participants as research method. So, underneath the early articulation of my questions, the open-ended memoir writing and interview process allowed the research participants to bring their own concerns and questions to the fore. My participants generously told me what I needed to know –

copiously, passionately, critically – even when I wasn't sure exactly what to ask them.

My research participants' questions and concerns were varied and complex. Sometimes intersecting and overlapping with my own and each others, other times distinct, fresh, and thorny, they always demanded I pay close and careful attention as I made sense of students' lives in schools and the role of WEP in their educational journeys.

I'd initially decided to interview faculty and staff primarily as a means of triangulating the data I'd garner from students. Yet, my conversations with faculty and staff proved vital, sending my research in new and challenging directions, forcing me to tackle head on the thorny issues of care and academic rigor at WEP. These concerned and reflective practitioners thrust the serious questions of how care and high standards, educational equity and academic rigor get lived out, or not, at WEP to the forefront of my research and writing (explored in chapters 5 and 6). They pushed me to tackle head-on a complex issue that is, I believe, at the heart of struggles for educational equity for many non-traditional college students today. Their concerns and queries enlarged my research scope beyond the borders of the students' lives and pushed me, happily, outside the parameters of this one educational space.

Faculty and staff also used my research to wonder aloud about the program's transformative potential and their own roles in educating for critical consciousness and social change (explored in chapter 7). To varying extents, they scrutinized the loftiness of their goals and aspirations and held them up against the reality of the program as they lived it day-to-day. While I'd aimed for a multi-tiered analysis that

situated the concentric circles of student lives and educational program within the broad political and economic forces that structure and limit them, I was fortunate to count upon research participants who eagerly joined me in this quest.

My student research participants taught me many things as well, taking ownership of their memoirs, steering me in directions I did not know existed, and certainly could not have known I needed to go. In a field note, I reflect upon what I think I am hearing.

I think students are telling me about the kinds of educational spaces they need in order to achieve academically and make it in/through school. I think I am also hearing what kinds of spaces DON'T work for these students. I am evolving an argument for small schools within large universities, for places where students are known (by staff, faculty, and other students), where being black (and adult and female) is not an anomaly, where students feel like teachers care whether they succeed or fail... (5/20/04)

I was privileged to be able to hitch-hike along on students' journeys as they made sense of their prior educational experiences and as they wrote, revised, and re-envisioned their educations through their memoirs. Their stories illuminated the complexity of their mobility desires and re-defined what mobility means to them, their families, and communities (explored in Chapter 3). Their memoirs forced me to confront the deep trauma and pain of their previous educational experiences and revealed the ways in which schools, and teachers, blunted their educational aspirations and derailed their motivation to achieve. Yet, their stories also depicted an abiding faith in education to improve their lives (these dual themes are explored in Chapter 4). The memoirs also revealed much about the specific ways in which WEP did, and didn't, foster their academic success and underscored both the importance of care and the challenges of achieving academic rigor (explored in chapters 5 and 6).

Finally, they illustrated the varied ways in which students embraced, or not, a conception of education as personally and socially transformative (explored in Chapter 7). And, they did this all through beautifully written memoirs that moved and awed me, and deserve to be published some day in their own right.

As I conducted my research, analyzed my data, and began to write, I found that underneath my specific research questions and process was my own buried quest to better understand the social change aspect of the program, to flesh out its limits and enliven its possibilities. In field notes, I reflect on the complexity of adding education for social change to the already charged mission of bringing academically under-prepared adult students to degree completion.

Students start [at WEP] so beaten down by their previous educational experiences, so fearful, so hesitant, so full of self-blame. To find a place that allows them to thrive academically is a lot. To have that same space move them to critical consciousness and action is a huge leap few students are ready to make. (4/12/04)

The same desire to be an agent of social change and actor for social justice that brought me, long ago, to teaching was embedded deep within my research questions and methods. Though these aspirations had been pushed underground by the very difficulty of their attainment in my own teaching at WEP, they are the core of what I value in education and research and constitute the foundation of this inquiry. In the following section, I explore how using memoir writing by research participants adds to the ways in which critical educational theory, practice, and research meet, enhance, contradict, and complicate one another.

Writing the Personal as Research

As my research questions and process began to take shape, I settled upon the writing of educational memoirs by research participants as the best way to realize my quest for a transformative research paradigm (Lather, 1991). As a teacher, I'd experimented a lot with using personal narrative writing in classes and I knew that most people loved to write their lives, even inexperienced writers were often good at it, and that memoirs would provide me with the rich and nuanced data I'd need to answer my research questions. I also hoped that experimenting with personal narrative writing on the part of my research participants was something I could offer both the participants and the burgeoning field of narrative inquiry. While more researchers are beginning to explore the role of writing in the research process (Ouellette, 2003; Richardson, 1998) and others are exploring their own subjectivity through autobiography in the writing up of research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I was able to locate few substantial examples of research that engages participants in writing their life stories (Cochran-Smith, 1995 is a notable exception to this). I hope my work helps to further this deepening trend in narrative research.

Writing in/and the College Context

Engaging my research participants in writing as part of my research made particular sense given the context – a college program that had struggled in recent years to enhance the development of student writing skills. Not only was I well known to students as a writing instructor, but for many of my research participants, improving their writing was an intrinsic part of the college experience and a feared and desired goal in their return to higher education.

Florence states outright in her memoir that improving her writing was part and parcel of why she returned to college. Lisa comments on her transformation as a writer during her college tenure.

The first paper I did, I got a C and I am like, what is this?! I had no concept of what writing was about, how to put it together. And then my English professor was X and then all of that kind of changed...she really gave us the groundwork for being able to write comprehensively and put everything together. We had to do a research paper for her and it all began to fall in place

William chose a photograph of himself with Amiri Baraka (when he spoke at an event held at WEP) as his educational artifact to represent the significance of writing during his college experience. He explains,

[College] helped me focus on my own writing... I think my own writing became stronger, because that's the only thing that really lasts, especially when you want to get a message out, to grab people, so I tried to strengthen that. [College] really made me a better writer. In fact, it's painful for me to read the things that I wrote when I first got to college. In fact, I don't even read them.

Sandra reflected on the role writing has always played in her college goals since her first attempt at higher education several decades ago.

I chose English as my major. I wanted to be a writer but I was not encouraged to pursue it as a profession. No one really understood my passion for writing so there was no one to share it with. My eldest aunt and advisor did not consider writing a serious occupation for black people. She convinced me to consider something more practical like nursing, or teaching, so I changed my major to psychology.

For many of my research participants, becoming powerful writers had previously felt out of reach, like a secret, yet cordoned off, desire. College – at WEP – allowed them to claim their right to be writers. April reveals both the power she ascribes to the written word and her hesitation to see herself and her writing as

worthy of publication in describing how she felt when an essay she wrote was published in the WEP 'zine.

Being able to write something that was eventually able to be published in the school magazine was, it was a biggie... seeing my work in print, it made me think of the way I thought of work in print. You always think that the person who writes a book or who writes something that's published is very well educated to write something like that... I was kind of embarrassed cause I didn't think it was good enough...actually seeing it [in print] was kind of overwhelming.

Improving writing and enhancing self-confidence are entwined outcomes of higher education for many of my research participants. April reflects on this in her memoir.

If you were to examine my writing when I started college and compare it to my writing now, it would seem it came from two different sources...Had this memoir course been given when I started college I would not have taken it, because I did not think I could handle it. I did not have the confidence I now have... I did not think I was relevant.

For others, developing their writing skills was key to *feeling* capable of job mobility.

Gillian describes how improving her writing skills intersected with her mobility goals. "...[A]ll the writing definitely helped. It just gave me more confidence and made me feel like I belong in this [work] environment."

Research that Returns

Using writing, particularly memoir writing, as a research method, was also a way to give something back to my research participants. Not only were the participants able to gain college credits for their participation in the memoir writing course, many expressed unsolicited, and heartfelt, appreciation for the opportunity to write a long pent-up and overdue memoir that transformed their vision of their own educational trajectories.

Phyllis (who'd initially expressed deep reservations about my role as a white teacher researching students of color) articulated a common sentiment among my research participants in an email she sent me after finishing the last draft of her memoir.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to write many things I needed to express. Without your intricate questioning, I don't know if I would have gone back this far, but I am glad I did. Writing, for me, allows me to cleanse my soul and thoughts, without incrimination. So again, thanks.

This note accompanied April's final draft of her memoir.

Now that this class is over and I reflect on the journey from beginning to end of writing this memoir, I am surprised. I say surprised because I did not intend to be so honest about my life, and my faults... Most important of all this class has allowed me to see all that I have accomplished since coming to America, and to fully understand that I AM RELEVANT.

To you Emily I say THANK YOU! This is a lot for any one person to give to another. You have given me all of the above through your thoughtful probing during the process of this class.

Ivy wove her reflections on the memoir writing process – which provided both the impetus and structure to write her educational life as well as an engaged, critical, and supportive audience of peers – into the final draft of her memoir.

... [writing my memoir] was the most cathartic and enlightening experience. I learned so much about myself. I re-discovered my attributes and flaws, the good and the bad... There were times when I felt fully exposed. At one point, I wanted to pull the copies of my draft out of the hands of my classmates and make excuses, but when I saw that nobody was laughing, I relaxed. I saw that people respected my feelings and that meant a great deal... As I received positive feedback from others I was encouraged to go deeper within myself. The single most petrifying experience was the first group session when we read out loud. On purpose I wrote a very superficial draft, not very confessional. But when I read and heard what others write I felt like a complete wimp. The other students wrote with such feeling and honesty that I realized that if they could write freely so could I.

Sandra reflected in our follow-up interview how the writing of her educational memoir was essential to obtaining closure on her experience in higher education. Since college graduation, for so many of my research participants, did not result in a new job, or greater social status, the writing of their memoirs helped students to explore how their educations powerfully altered their lives despite the constraints they face in converting their degrees into opportunities for mobility.

Writing as Part of a Transformative Research Paradigm

Most importantly, to me, my use of personal narrative writing as a form of data collection was a means of enacting my quest for a transformative research paradigm that mirrored my intentions and goals as a critical educator. While I do not want to make grandiose or overstated claims for the power of writing the personal, neither do I want to diminish the significance for the writers involved. I found that through writing our memoirs, the research participants and I changed the ways in which we understood our educational trajectories in powerful ways. Our memoirs gained voice and strength over many drafts – with the critique and encouragement of our peers – evolving into powerful “counterstories” that challenge accepted wisdom about adult students, serving to destroy oppressive myths about how and why students fail or succeed in schools (Delgado, 1989; Perry, 2003). The narratives evolved in multiple ways – some subtle, others overt, some suddenly, most incrementally, each draft fleshing out a layered, nuanced story.

Several of the narratives moved from simple redemption tales to complex and critical accounts of educational tenacity as they were revised over many drafts. In Sandra’s memoir, for example, the second draft grew from three to eighteen pages as

her story unraveled, grew more complex, troubled itself. From a straight “conversion” narrative (Kates, 1995) in which college at the WEP redeems her, Sandra begins to explore her sense of failure and shame as a college “dropout” and to question whether or not educational credentials, and the mobility attained through them, is her definition of success. Her final draft of her memoir leaves us with a clear sense of her social justice agenda, and finds her rejecting status based on educational attainment, seeking to put her knowledge to work at the service of her community as a housing organizer.

Other narratives moved from self-blame toward a sense of personal agency. The first draft of April’s memoir, for example, was riddled with self-blame for her perceived educational failures and failings. Her second draft moved incrementally towards a vision of herself as an agent in her own education. By her third draft she explored more deeply and insightfully her parents’ limited educational backgrounds and the impact this, coupled with crippling cutbacks in education in her country, had on her educational trajectory. Brenda’s first draft is a long and complicated tale of how her desire to attend college falls victim to the educational bureaucracy in her home country in the West Indies. What evolves, over many drafts, is her depiction of her own educational agency as she navigates the substantial barriers to becoming college bound. Her early drafts present her as wading through seemingly endless bureaucratic obstacles, the victim of bad luck, bad timing, and the fact that “fate wasn’t shining its light in my pathway.” By her final draft, a clearer sense of her own agency has emerged and her ultimate depiction of herself moves from that of someone who is caught in a web of forces that act upon her to an agent of her own

circumstances operating within the constraining educational structures and opportunities available to her.

The critical writing pedagogy implemented in this project, in which the writers went through a semester long process of writing, sharing, and revising their educational memoirs, engaged my research participants in locating their “personal” narratives in the broader, social, and historical forces that have, at least partly, forged them and thus, to see their experiences in these new, more critical ways. Seeing the collective nature of their personal experience allowed students to revise their understanding and portrayals of their educations, to see their struggles as more than the result of individual weakness and failure. In the writing groups, students seized upon these commonalities and urged one another towards more critical narrations of their experiences, compelling their peers to move away from self-blame for their educational failures to a more structural view of how, and why, their educations had, in fact, failed them. Over many drafts of their memoirs the students’ portrayals of race and racism became more critical, searing, and real. Their depictions of the constraints social class imposed on their educational achievement grew more accurate. For example, class as an obstacle to her educational attainment is everywhere in Brenda’s narrative, although never named as such. Ivy and another classmate (who opted not to participate in my research) saw it and urged Brenda to more accurately depict the structural constraints that limited her educational ambition. As children of immigrants from developing nations, they spoke to these issues with moral authority and first hand experience.

When I asked students to reflect in writing on the writing groups after the first meeting, seven out of eleven students mention the word common – common experiences, commonalities, common bond, in common, one very important factor in common – in describing the writings their classmates shared in the groups. In an anonymous reflection on the writing groups, one research participant wrote:

I loved meeting in the group. It was really helpful to know that others share the pain that you thought was unique only to you. It was nice to create a bond with the other group members and to look forward to the next draft.

Becoming Visible and Being Changed

And, finally, I include excerpts from my own memoir which I began to write as I formulated my research plan and methodology because, as Clandinin & Connelly (2000) suggest, “working in this space [narrative inquiry] means that we become visible with our own lived and told stories” (p. 62). The students’ stories and my own overlap, entwine, touch one another in important ways. Mostly, they are negative images of one another, eerily similar, yet distinct. All stories of race in schools, how we lived, breathed, write de-segregation is entirely different. In my own educational memoir, I reflect on the impact school desegregation (or integration as we thought about it back then) had on my own educational journey and how my students’ memoirs changed my sense of what those experiences meant. In my memoir, I wrote:

Several years ago marked my 20th high school reunion and I waffled for weeks over whether or not to attend. The woman who organized it brought back bad memories of high school – a time divided between the usual adolescent angst and the agony of my father’s death from cancer... Did I really want to spend an evening with the people who saw me through that time? I wondered to myself and in numerous emails to my friend Liz, whose desire to attend reminded me of the overwhelming fondness and gratitude I feel towards the schools I grew up in. So, I went... The reunion reminded me of the many ways in which I’ve been shaped by the intentional experiment in racial integration that defined my schools and how

that project, however flawed and failed, is deep within me. I attribute a lot to my public education. Not good grammar or knowledge of Shakespeare. Not a clear sense of history or being well read. But a vision of the world, its possibilities and potentials. A sense of difference as fertile, not frightening. I attribute my marriage, in part, to my public education. Not because I knew my husband at that point in my life – as I completed high school, he was taking up arms against a dictatorship armed and supported by the US – but because the schools I attended, unwittingly perhaps, planted the seed that it was possible for me to make a life with someone so different than myself. It is with a deep sense of gratitude that I recall my public education...

When I arrived at Tufts for college and met kids who'd gone to Andover and Choate, as I looked around and wondered where all the black students were, I began to realize that my educational experience had indeed been unique. A district created in the late 60's under the Princeton plan for school desegregation, Greenburgh siphoned off bits of contiguous localities creating an anomalous whole that spanned the racial and socio-economic spectrum. How unique this experiment was has become only clearer over time. I've watched the construction of a Solomon Schechter school next door to my former high school, ready to absorb the white (not so liberal) Jewish students whose parents, a generation ago, might have actually believed in racial integration in the schools. I've read the sobering books on re-segregation whose copious data confirm this trend. I've learned about the tiny percentage of black teachers in American schools and remembered Mrs. Thomas, Mrs. Shelton, Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Sydnor, the black women who taught me to read and learn and wonder. I've read the painful stories of school integration my African American students write, their words a searing condemnation of my naïve and myopic hope that what was good for (a white girl like) me might be good for everyone. But, of course it wasn't. Even I knew that in some part of myself back then...

Through composing my educational memoir, my depiction and understanding of my own educational journey changed. My conviction in the rightness and power of school desegregation faltered and waned as my school experiences bumped up against my students' stories, the borders between their experiences and my own surprisingly blurrier than when we began. I conclude my memoir with these thoughts:

Questions of democracy and public education are rarely theoretical or lofty. They are lived out every day in squat brick buildings and overheated classrooms – often badly, with disastrous implications for the children involved, always imperfectly. But, in rare moments, I think it does matter that the kids poring over the composting worm box in Benji – my son's – class are Japanese, African-American, Mexican, white. They are deep in play, aware at

this moment only of the orange peels and melon rinds the worms wind themselves through and around, sharing ooh's and ahh's over the tiniest of worms one has discovered, arguing over who gets to spray water next. The large debates swirling around public education elude them. What will stick, I hope, are the memories of this specific moment, who their classmates are, what feels possible to them. It is what I carry forth from my public education – my deep sense that what I learned in school was much, much more than the basics and much larger than myself.

Concluding Thoughts

This project is one example of the role writing the personal can play in critical pedagogy and research. It confirms my belief that students must have opportunities to write, and revise, their lived experiences, within the collective of their peers, in order to understand how social structures operate, to discover the power of their own agency, to be able to critique their worlds. Writing the personal, I would argue, is not merely a prelude to other forms of more academic or analytical writing, but the real stuff out of which critical pedagogy, and research, can be made. The memoir writers of the Worker Education Program best illustrate the power of writing the personal, and of critical writing pedagogy, with their tenacious, poignant, revealing, inspiring stories. I thank them for teaching me much about education and enabling me to re-write the story of my own educational, and teaching, experiences in a more nuanced and critical way.

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