Promise & Possibility: A Case For Culturally Relevant Curriculum In A Postsecondary English Classroom of African American Adult Learners

First Thoughts

Thirteen years ago when I was asked by my New York University advisor to declare a major, I didn't think twice about choosing the *18th Century Novel*. In high school I had a wonderful English teacher, Ms. Norma Brescia, who inspired me to fall in love with the writings of Shakespeare, Emily Bronte, Jane Austen, and the Romantic Poets. When I was asked to select a major in college, it seemed as natural as breathing for me to choose an area of study in this literary tradition.

Since age 13 I knew I wanted to be an English teacher, and as a young undergraduate student I was resolved that this area of literature would best prepare me to teach English at the high school level. I had been taught the Canon in school, and I knew it was what I was expected to teach.

I wore my choice of study like a banner of pride until I took my first African Folklore and Black Writers courses during my senior year at NYU. Instantly, I felt as novelist Marie Cardinal did when she heard jazz for the first time: "My heart began to accelerate…gripped by panic at the idea of dying there in the middle of spasms… I ran into the street like someone possessed" (Morrison , vii).

I didn't exactly run into the streets, but I marched into my advisor's office! To borrow two very common clichés, I felt like someone had pulled the rug from underneath me and the wool over my eyes. I was angry with my advisor for not suggesting I focus my studies on something

more culturally relevant. Of course this was nonsense. My advisor had no way of knowing what my interests were outside of what I had told her. I, unfortunately, was not knowledgeable enough about my own culture to discuss the possibility of making it the focus of my college study. I resolved it was no one's fault but my own, or perhaps maybe my teachers in elementary and secondary school. "Historically through desegregation, black culture was not legitimized in white educational institutions (hooks, 4).

After taking those two classes I became obsessed with learning all that I could about Black history and culture, and in particular literature by Black authors. It was hard for me to deal with feeling that I had 'lost' two years of my life studying works that in no way helped me to navigate being young, black, and female in a male-dominated White America. This is not a lamentation over studying the *18th Century novel*, for as Morrison said "you must read everything." However, I do realize that reading the works of Swift, Pope, Johnson, Fielding and Austen taught me nothing about myself.

For the past eight years, while earning my Master's degree at Columbia University in English Education, teaching high school and college and pursing a doctorate degree in English Education, I've spent my spare time reading about and researching my "Africaness." My undergraduate and current experience of teaching composition to African American adults has led me to the topic of culturally relevant curriculum in the postsecondary English classroom.

What Is Culturally Relevant Curriculum?

Most of the research on culturally relevant teaching and culturally relevant curriculum (CRC) focuses on elementary classrooms. Little of this very important research places the college classroom at the center of the discussion. However, Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1996) found that the African American women in their study expressed that they felt "excluded and stereotyped in class discussions, small-group work, and class curriculum."

Likewise, Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood's (2000) study revealed that "The African-American men and women felt that the curriculum did not reflect their histories and experiences and that the worst instructors were perceived as demonstrating bias based on student race and gender." These two studies suggest that the cultural relevance (or lack thereof) of a course's curriculum impacts how African American adult learners experience higher education.

The outcry for culturally relevant curriculum by African American students is not a recent phenomenon. Its roots can be traced back to the 1960s on college campuses all over the nation. Student radicals fought for the establishment of Black Studies programs. Beginning in 1967 with Maulenga (Ron) Karenga and his colleagues at San Francisco State University, "Black Studies took on a highly militant temper of legitimizing Black Aesthetics" (Cacciottolo).

Primarily, this paper represents a discussion of the research completed by scholars who have looked at the importance of cultural relevance in the classroom. I have leaned on the research of Gloria Ladson-Billings, Lisa Delpit, Beverly Tatum, Geneva Smitherman and others whose work show the possibility of culturally relevant curriculum. Secondarily, but perhaps most important, this paper makes a claim for the promise this type of curriculum represents in a college composition classroom of African American adult learners. I argue that the positive effects of CRC can be seen in the writings of my students who are enrolled in *Translating Experience Into Essay* (TEE), a required English course that I am teaching this Fall.

Scholar Ladson-Billings (1992, p. 389) conducted a longitudinal study which convincingly argued the value of a curriculum that "involves conceptions of self and others that is based on accurate historical and social information." Culturally relevant curriculum "presents students' cultures in a positive light and invites students' participation (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Unlike those adult students in Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood's study, students who have a

curriculum that is relevant to their background have their cultural experiences honored. Adults come to the classroom with a variety of experiences. In their research of adult learners, Donaldson and Graham (2000), Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm and Dirkx (1999) and Kasworm (1997) found that "adults integrate new learning by making connections to knowledge schema. They reflect rich personal experience and draw on their previous knowledge and wisdom to make meaning."

One of the tenets of culturally relevant teaching and curriculum discovered by Ladson-Billings is that it puts the student at the center of the curriculum. In her longitudinal study of eight teachers who were deemed successful teachers of African American children, she found that even though they differed in their teaching styles, these teachers had certain things in common. In particular, they insisted that "students' real life experiences are legitimated as part of the official curriculum" (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 387).

Why Talk About History and Culture Anyway?

African Americans have endured the inhumane reality of a chattle slavery system which essentially stated they were not humans but animals. In his article *The Implications of African American Spirituality,* Richards (1985) states:

> Throughout their sojourn in America Africans have been taught the separateness of themselves from Africa and Africans. The teaching has been so ingrained that even in those communities which are "most African" there is the greatest scandal of being African." (p. 207)

Richards continues by asserting the "resilience" of African culture. Despite the stark reality of the Middle Passage and the experience of chattle slavery, Blacks have held on to their culture even

when it was being systematically "beat out" of them." Schlesinger (1999) notes that there is a "persistent ethos in U.S. culture that attempts to dismiss these cultural connections in an effort to move African Americans toward some mythical, homogenized American identity that is solely formed on this side of the Atlantic (p. 378). Culturally relevant curriculum encourages students to "choose excellence and succeed without rejecting their "Africaness" (Ladson-Billings, 1992b, p. 388). With the presence of culturally relevant curriculum, teachers and students are engaged in collective struggle against the status quo. These types of conversations spark discussions that help students realize that "current socioeconomic and political conditions are inequitable and unjust." These students come to see that "their oppression is a complete contradiction of the founding ideals of democracy in the U.S" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). It is not new news that:

> African Americans have long lived a disturbing contradictions—the experiences of systemic racial oppression in the first modern democracy, and exploitation in a country founded on the ideals of justice and liberty. (Beaubeouf-Lafontant, 1999)

Further, Beaubeouf-Lafontant (1999) states that "the social institution of formal education has not been untouched by a sheltered form of the larger contradiction of racism in the United States." It is my opinion that college classrooms can become a place to problematize and reject white domination through positive self- and cultural affirmations. "The classroom with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility" (Beaubeouf-Lafontatnt, 1999).

Historically, schools have not been willing to embrace the history and culture of African American children in their classroom. Tatum (1997, p.62) argues that Black students respond negatively when their culture is not represented in the curriculum. She describes an "oppositional identity development" in which "Black students are forced to choose between affirming their

culture and academic success. When their culture is not present, Black students may feel that academic success is not part of being Black.

I argue that the research and results on culturally relevant teaching and curriculum at the elementary level can, and should be applied to the postsecondary level as well. The majority of African American students in college, and certainly those in my class, were educated in public schools where they received little, if any, accurate information about their history and culture. It is likely that they endured negative images of themselves and their ancestors. It is also likely that they received a Eurocentric education that presented them as the "other." This was certainly my experience. Even though I went to elementary schools which were predominantly attended by African Americans or other minorities, the curriculum in English, History and other subjects were Eurocentric in nature. At the very least, culturally relevant curriculum encourages the adult learner to explore the culture and history which may have been ignored or marginalized for most of their educational lives. Culturally relevant teaching and curriculum are:

> Conscious of the presence of racism that surrounds students with distorted and overwhelmingly negative images of the cultures, histories and possibilities of people of color.
>
> (Beaubeouf-Lafontant, 1999)

Classrooms which contain CRC are places where "students of color especially come to see themselves and their communities in affirming ways while gaining access to mainstream 'codes of power." (Delpit, 1995, p.19). They come to better understand their relegated subordinate position. The understanding of their position opens the possibility for devising change.

Culturally Relevant Curriculum and the College Composition Classroom

To illuminate the claims I've made in this paper, I include writing samples and vignettes from writing assignments and class discussions. These examples offer support for the four key benefits of CRC which emerged during my informal analyses.

For the past four years, I have taught English at a small urban college in New York City. Currently I teach *Translating Experience Into Essay* (TEE) a required, first-level English course for freshmen. The adults enrolled at the School are earning their Baccalaurete degree. The School was founded in 1972, as an addendum to a large, historical, college in a suburb of New York. The School was created with the specific purpose to serve as the college's:

> specialist in higher education for adults. It is concerned with fostering those special sensitivities and responses the College must develop to create learning environments complimentary to the needs of adults fully engaged by, and in, the life of the community. (School handbook, 7)

The majority of the students who attend the School are African American. Kasworm, Sandman and Sissell (2000) found that adult learners, age 25 and older "currently represent nearly one-half of credit students enrolled in higher-education." Further, research conducted by Aiken, Cervero and Johnson-Bailey (2001); Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood (2000) found that "African Americans constitute a larger proportion of the student body in older age groups." The campus where I teach enrolls several hundred African American students age 25 and older. The School acknowledges that adults have a different way of knowing, and experiencing education, and that the model used to educate traditional-age college students (age 18-22) may not be the most beneficial model for the thousands of adults that populate its five campuses throughout the city.

Students who are enrolled in my TEE course are simultaneously enrolled in another freshman course titled *Experience, Learning and Identity* (ELI). In ELI they read Paulo Freire, John Dewey, and Richard Rodriquez. The course culminates with an **Educational Autobiography** in which they reflect on the type of education they've received in their lifetime and an evaluation of the type of education they believe they need to be successful college students. As a complement to ELI, the premise of TEE is to:

> focus on writing as a tool for critical thinking. Consistent with a unified and integrated approach to learning, the course incorporates verbal, reading, and computer skills into the development of writing. Students use the computer to write narrative, descriptive and expository essays based on their personal experiences." (Ruiz-Sealey, 2001).

While I am expected to teach the students to use writing as a tool for self-reflection, investigation and other forms of analysis, I do so through the use of a curriculum that reflects the demographic makeup of the class. For example, students achieve objectives through "readings drawn from the slave narratives, the speeches of Paul Robeson, Jr., Malcolm, X, the letters of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Dunbar Nelson, Langston Hughes, Clarence Atkins and the autobiographies of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Dubois and others. (Ruiz-Sealey, 2001). There is group work, peer review, presentations, writer workshops, field trips, reader and writer surveys, student autobiographies, and self-evaluation built into the structure of the class.

Through my informal analysis of student writings and class discussion, key themes have emerged. I've observed that the curriculum in TEE:

1) Validates the students' language,

2) Respects and values the students' history and culture,

3) Places the students' life experiences at the center of the curriculum, and,

4) Opens space for self-affirmation and confirmation of goals.

You Can Say That Again! Language Validation thru CRC

> *We have kids in the inner cities who are verbal geniuses, but we call them deficient in school and attempt to eradicate a part of their identity. But by teaching them the rules of language appropriateness, by showing them the similarities between the way they speak and Standard English, you can encourage them without disrespecting them.*
>
> *Dr. Geneva Smitherman*[1]

My students are fluent speakers of Ebonics. During class discussions when they speak in Ebonics I do not correct their English. About the second week into the semester I initiate a conversation about their speaking and writing. This is a discussion where I take a back seat and listen to how they believe they "speak incorrectly," "don't know proper English" and "can't write good." I listen and periodically interject with "really?" "Oh, you think so," and "I see it a little differently." By the third week we've discussed the Oakland 1996 court case, the historic Ann Arbor case and the various opinions on Black English Vernacular (BEV). By week four I share articles by James Baldwin, James Rickford, and other articles from NCTE's English Journal on the subject. We talk about the purpose of Standard English and how both languages are equal in validity, except that one is the language of power." Then we talk about power, who has it, who doesn't and how this came to be.

My intention is not to turn the class into a linguistics course, however, because they've come in to my class with the understanding that in 18 weeks they will acquire the skills to "write [1]

[1] All quotes which follow the key theme headers in this paper are taken from Elza Dinwiddie'Boyd's In Our Own Words. 1996. New York: Avon Books.

better," I believe that I must talk about language—their language— for this is what they will use to produce their written work. "To put it simply, human beings interact with their worlds primarily through mediational means: and these mediation means, the use of cultural artifacts, tools and symbols, including language, play crucial roles in the formation of human intellectual capacities" (Moll, 2000, p.257).

The students are often amazed at the articles and that BEV is a language with a formal structure. I observe the looks on their faces and listen as they grapple with the notion that they indeed speak a valid language. This fall, during the second week of TEE, Chuck, a student in his late thirties, told me and the class "When I talk I don't feel I'm speaking right. I feel that I've been talkin' this way all my life with my friends, hangin' out in the street and all, you know, and it ain't right. It can't be right."

Chuck's comment ignited a discussion which lasted for 40 minutes. At first it seemed that he resented my validation of his language and his bi-dialectilism. I'm almost certain that he expected me to tell him that there was something wrong with the way he talked. He continued to resist what I was telling him and closed the class discussion with "I'ma have to disagree with you on this one Mr. Ruiz." After a few weeks of disseminating articles and validating his language use in his writing I noticed a shift in his opinion. Now at week 11 in the semester, Chuck accepts his language and is working on using it as a way to improve his Standard English skills. "Like creating a 'culturally relevant' curriculum, the experts on teaching black students suggest that the black experience and language should be represented in writing assignments" (Pearce, 2001).

For instance, Smitherman (1994, p.95) argues "that BEV has a distinct syntactical pattern and should not be viewed as "incorrect." Smitherman urges instructors to "de-emphasize students' concerns about BEV grammar; over concentration on these forms frequently suppresses the production of African American discourse and its rich expressive style." In a recent essay assignment surrounding the Civil Rights Movement in America, Chuck writes about the close relationship he shared with his grandmother before she died, and the influence her experiences had on him:

> My grandmother is from Cherokee Center, Alabama. My grandmother,
> Jennie V. Stubbs Reese passed on November 18, 2001. She was very ill.
> That's why I made it my business to go see her once a year. And since
> I was the oldest grandson, and the only family member in New York,
> she told me all kinds of stories about the Civil Rights Movement.
> But the stories she'd told me the most is the one about Martin Luther King, Jr…

Not correcting their language sends the message to my students that their voices are accepted and valued. As my students discuss their lives and the literature, they do so in their own unique way. I am convinced that there are times when only their language is sufficient to use in order to evoke the exact emotion that a memory brings. "Voice pertains to the role of language in constructing meaning. Voices applies to written as well as spoken language and relates to point of view: "it is concerned with the broader issues of a speaking subject's perspective, conceptual horizon, intention and world view" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 232). Culturally relevant curriculum helps students gain "the confidence and skills to verbalize their own thoughts and beliefs" (Moll, 2000, p.252).

In an essay assignment requesting students to recall an experience that caused a strong emotion, Sheniqua writes about her mother walking out on her at the age of nine. In her own voice

she explains how the pain she endured has given her the inspiration to be the best mother she can be to her son.

> When I was nine years old I lived with my mother. I had my own room and a pet dog. One day, I went to walk the dog in the park and my mother told me that she was going to the store.
>
> Two days went past and my mother still did not come home. I could not call or go next door because we did not have a phone and my mother told me not to leave the house. I was very scared and hate being in the house by myself.
>
> Later on that week, my grandma explained what happen to my mother. My mother had some kind of break down. That is why she did not come home. Eight year went by. My grandmother had my mother stay with us and her new grandson.
>
> When I think about my past and my present, I try my best to give my son everything I never had was a "Mother."

Sheniqua shared some very moving memories in her essay. I suspect that if she had to worry about whether she was writing in Standard English or not, the flow of these memories may have been hindered.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T for Student History and Culture

> *…millions of Americans know now that the story of African Americans is the story of one of the greatest flights of the human spirit in human history and that the history called American history cannot be understood or redeemed without a confrontation with the history called Black history. – Ebony Magazine*

Author, preacher and activist James Baldwin once said "If you know from whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go." Many of my students, albeit they are in their late thirties or older do not have in-depth knowledge of their history and culture. They have mixed feelings about it, often torn between pride and shame, but they are curious and prepared to talk about this if given the chance.

When my students and I have "Black race" discussions, this reminds me of the classes I took at NYU as an undergraduate. The professor I had for the Black writers course had a way of making me and the other Black students feel pride about our ancestry, and not a bit embarrassed about our lack of knowledge of what it meant to be Black. During his class, for the first time in my life, I felt it was okay to be Black and talk about what that meant. The main text in TEE is Autobiography of a People: Three Centuries of African American History Told By Those Who Lived It by historian, award-winning author, and journalist Herb Boyd. The premise of the book is to give the reader a comprehensive look at 300 years of Black/African history through the "voices" of those people who lived at different times during history. The book opens with an excerpt from the 1720 narrative of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (James Albert), the grandson of the King of Bornu. His narrative gives the reader a glimpse of African life and recounts in detail the events that led up to his captivity. The book ends with a 1999 sermon given by Reverend Bernice King who asks the listener/reader "not to forget the courage of Harriet Tubman, the vision of W.E.B. DuBois, or the compassion of her father Martin Luther King, Jr.

As the central text for the course, whether we are discussing the standard essay, first or third person writing, or the autobiography as a writing form, we *are* discussing the history of the students in the classroom. They have the opportunity to talk about the literature and make very real and personal connections to it while they learn to use English as a tool for writing and expression. Moll (2000) writes "culture is the social milieu in which the life of the people is embedded, culture

understood as an "accumulation of the social experiences of humanity, the concrete form of means and modes, schemes and patterns of human behavior, cognition and communication" (p.257).

In her journal, forty-four year-old Candace writes:

> In reading Herb Boyd's Autobiography of a People, I am amazed and angered at the treatment black people received during those times. I was always aware of the hardship that blacks endured, but not so explesively detailed. I always believed that my lifestyle would not be possible if not for the struggles of my people. The determination to survive with dignity and morals intact speaks volumes to me. Throughout our lives from the beginning of slavery to the present; we have always had to endure the wrath of oppression.
>
> Today, I believe that the stigma of slavery, racism and prejudice still prevails as an ugly scar in this country. It is a privilege to learn all that I can about my history. The history of my predecessors is rich with courage and fortitude to maintain a lifestyle befitting any human being.
>
> I look forward to reading other accounts and I am grateful that our history didn't get destroyed through death…

On the midterm exam, Renetta took the opportunity to reflect on her childhood, and what it was like growing up in Harlem. It was one of the best essays I'd read from Renetta all semester. She masterfully displayed that she could write in the form of the five paragraph essay from an outline (what the exam tested), and she was able to do so by taking a journey back to a special time in her life.

> I love Harlem. I've always loved Harlem even before I lived here. When I was growing up I wanted to live in the tenement buildings and sit on the stoop all night long. I wanted to be the one to run upstairs to tell Aunt Dot "the first number is a four." After we moved, I never stopped missing Harlem. Even though it was considered "the ghetto." I made it my business to be

> there on just about every school holiday. My mother tried to get me to stay and make stronger friendships with girls in the St. Albans neighborhood. My mom was perplexed as to why I preferred to stay at Aunt Dot's through the holidays…Maybe one day I'd explain to her that Queens' girls did not know how to jump double-dutch like the Harlem girls, and they talked funny.
>
> Now I am raising children right here, back in Harlem. I love the fact that the older folks still sit out on the stoops waiting to hear what the number is. While they are sitting out there they know what my kids are up to and will tell me in a heartbeat if they do something wrong. The old folks on my block know who came through the block today; who's not home from work yet; who's got a "fast-assed" little girl; who died, who's sick, who's on drugs, and who may get on drugs if his "momma ain't careful."

In her essay, Renetta made reference to playing numbers and jumping double-dutch, two prominent activities in the culture of the Black urban community. In her journal entry, thirty-seven year-old Sheila writes:

> So, where will I start? Sitting on my bed and reading Autobiography Of a People. I really enjoy reading about history. There is so much that I did not know about history. Herb Boyd really out did himself. He gave us blacks a lot of our history in a book. I especially enjoy reading about the women.

Except for those few classes at NYU, I've never had the experience of a college course like TEE that placed the history of my people at the foundation, and had it serve as a springboard for most, if not all of the lessons.

Student Life Experience Central to Curriculum

> *I am my best work – a series of road maps, reports, recipes, doodles and prayers from the front lines."*
>
> – *Audre Lorde*

Ladson-Billings (1992, p.117) suggests using "real-life experiences" as part of " the 'official' curriculum." In other words, teachers should select literature that will allow students to discuss personal experience in relation to the material. Delpit (1995, p.32) also agrees with this perspective. She states, "the teacher cannot be the only expert in the classroom. To deny students their own expert knowledge is to disempower them." After viewing "Awakenings, 1954-1956," the first tape in the "Eyes On the Prize" series, Candace connected to the images on the video and shared:

> "I lived a few blocks from the park where those shots [police officers turning water hoses and dogs on blacks] were taken so this is very real to me. I didn't live far from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church were the four little girls were murdered. It was strange being a kid at that time. All of this we are watching is very real to me."

The discussion around "Awakenings" was, in my assessment, one of the most lively discussions we'd had during our weeks together. As a response to the video, Lorelie chose to write a poem on how she connected to the video, an excerpt from her poem "To Know" reads:

> To know that people can only see
> the external and do not care about
> the pain others feel within.
>
> To know that we as black people
> had to go through so much,
> and to know that we made it
> through and we keep on pressing
> almost as if we were untouched.

In order to successfully teach black students black issues must be an explicit part of the curriculum. Tatum (1997, p.64) suggests that "an achieving black student can become an emissary, someone who sees his or her own achievements as advancing the cause of the racial group." Black students are more likely to choose academic success if it affirms black culture. In a first-day writing exercise, Candace responds to an excerpt from Nelson Mandela's 1990 Inaugural speech, she writes:

> The unlimitless power that I receive from God is unmeasurable because it has a rippling effect on the world. Everywhere I go and everything I do needs to include this power. It is who I am. It is my job to share with others this enlightment in a positive way. Using my experiences, hopes and dreams, God can use me to help lift the spirit of others to their highest potentials.

Responding to the same excerpt from Mandela's speech Renetta writes:

> I do believe I have something to offer to this world, however I didn't always believe that. It took a horrendous life of drugs and degradation and then an ascend into a better life, through the grace of God, for me to understand that I am somebody that has something to offer this world. Through my writing, I'm hoping to do some good.

In addition to adding reading material by black authors to the curriculum, successful teachers of black students create assignments that legitimize the black experience. In her essay "The Blacker the Berry, the Sweeter the Juice," Geneva Smitherman (1994, p. 95) suggests that teachers of black students should, "design strategies for incorporating the black imaginative, storytelling style" into student essays.

Aside from writing assignments on personal experience, researchers of culturally relevant teaching and CRC suggest creating research assignments that deal with culturally relevant issues. Ladson-Billings (1994) says that teachers of black students should help them "make connections

between their local, national, racial, cultural, and global identities." Tikki, a native of Nigeria has chosen to write about the current economic crisis in Lagos for her end-of-term research project. Another student, Angie selected the topic of AIDS for her research because, as she told the class, "I've lost family members from this disease, and it is a disease that is killing blacks in Africa and all over the world."

Several weeks into the semester, I've noticed that students initiate and delve into conversations about their culture. They want to discuss slavery and how it came to be. I realize, as I listen to them and read their writing they are looking for that which can explain their current position in this society. They are looking for ways to get out of the subordinate position they find themselves in their jobs and in life. I witness as they use the curriculum as a gateway to hope, a means to dialogue, and a declaration that the battle for them is far from over. "Specifically, culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes." (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 18) A successful teacher of black students truly cares about racial injustice, and thus addresses these issues overtly rather then attempting to downplay or ignore them.

A Space for Self-Affirmation and Confirmation of Goals

No one can figure out your worth but you.
– Pearl Bailey

The final key theme I would like to discuss that has emerged from the writings and discussions is the notion of self-affirmation and confirmation of goals. In TEE, students explore how past experiences have shaped who they are, who they want to become and what they would like to accomplish. Responding to the Mandela speech assignment, Trina writes:

> This speech makes me feel that I am in control of my life. It makes me ask myself questions: Who am I? Where I came from? I feel responsibility, and when people sees that they look up to me.

Trina shared with the class how learning about Mandela's struggle for Black South Africans inspired her to take a look at her own life in terms of what she wanted to accomplish and the person she wants to become. However, it is in the first journal entry of Antionette, a fifty-two year old student, that I noticed the theme of self-affirmation and confirmation of goals most prominently. She writes:

> I'm anxious. Emotional. And I've been feeling like I want to burst out In tears for the past two days. Classes started two days ago. 5:30 – 10:00 p.m. That's a very long time to be in one class. But they are six credit courses, I figure they have combined two classes into one.
>
> I have two professors that have been chosen by God to teach me. ELI & TEE. The sistahs, both of them are BAD! I see a part of me in each of them. That's what the emotions are all about. I see me in them. Straight Up, Educated, Strong, Powerful, Organized, Professional, I got myself together and you cannot mess with me.
>
> Let me tell you something else, I am getting ready to let this screaming, energetic, willing, enthusiastic, eager, strong, determined sistah out of my soul. She's been kicking and fighting for years to come out, but I would not let her shine. These two professors, Ruiz and Williams are going to force me to let her out…

Responding to the writing assignment which asked them to recall an experience that caused a strong emotion, Noemi connectes how she had been mistreated as a child with her raison d'etre for being the type of mother she is today, she writes:

> There was sometime in my life that I felt a lot of anger. A lot of anger when my stepfather had a drinking problem and he always used to yell at me an my sister for no reason. Even used to put his hands on us. My mother did nothing about it. I use to always go to school with the same clothes, and other kids use to make fun of me and my sister.
>
> One day I remember a social worker came to my house and took
>
> One day a social worker came to take my sister and me away from my stepfather. I felt kind of happy because I did not have to deal with his abusive behavior towards me. I felt safe and comfortable when they placed me into a foster home.
>
> I have two beautiful daughters…I will never treat them the way my parents treated me because I know what it feels like not be loved by your own parents and I would never make them feel that way.

On the midterm exam, Noemi chooses to discuss what she envisions for her future. She writes:

> The reasons why I decided to go back to college is because I wanted to offer a positive role model for my two young daughters, and it will also help me grow at my present job.
>
> Now people look at me differently since I came back to school. It's a little hard, because I have two young daughters to take care of. The only chance I get to study is when they are sleeping or at work when I go to lunch or have a five minute break. I don't really mind because in the long run it will benefit me and my two kids. It doesn't stop here, because when I get my Bachelor's degree I'm going for my Masters in Psychology.

And finally, Renetta grapples in her journal with her reason for wanting to earn good grades. She writes:

> I think my paper on John Dewey's Education and Experience was good. I hope Professor Wilson thinks so. I wonder why good grades are so important to me.

> Not that they shouldn't be, they should. But like Hogard and Jummie pointed out, I have to admit it does seem like kind of an obsession. I figured that when Hogard said 'you don't need to get all A's to pass, A's are nice but a D is passing. I felt a surge of panic rise up in me as I thought a D! Oh my God, no way. I resigned my job, a part of that was in order to do my very best in school. And without sounding egotistical, I know my very best can be pretty good.

Conclusion

When a curriculum has the ability to validate a student's language, show respect for the student's history and culture, place the student's life experiences at the center of the curriculum, and help the student work through a vision for their lives, this empowers the adult learner and offers an opportunity to raise the self-esteem, cultural awareness, motivation and the overall potential of that student to do well in the classroom.

Final Thoughts

I'm not quite sure why I've titled this paper. I am certain the title will change several times over the next few months as I think about my candidacy paper. I am also certain that this title will transform itself over the next few years as I attempt to meld research on culturally relevant curriculum and the narratives of my African American female students' experiences of college in to a dissertation.

For now, this paper reflects where I am with this research and my position on culturally relevant curriculum in the postsecondary classroom of African American adult learners. It reflects the concerns, assumptions and probings of a novice researcher who is anxious to insert her voice into this very important discourse.

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