

**Cultivating *the* Genius
of Black Children**

Other Redleaf Press Books by Debra Ren-Etta Sullivan

Learning to Lead:

Effective Leadership Skills for Teachers of Young Children

Second Edition

Learning from the Bumps in the Road:

Insights from Early Childhood Leaders

with Holly Elissa Bruno, Janet Gonzalez-Mena, and Luis Hernandez



Cultivating *the* Genius of Black Children

STRATEGIES TO CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP
IN THE EARLY YEARS

Debra Ren-Etta Sullivan



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*This book is dedicated to all Black children
and the wonderful ways they light up our classrooms
and add sparkling energy to our day!*

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Introduction

BLACK CHILDREN ARE GENIUSES just waiting to show the world their exceptional intellectual ability, creativity, and originality. Of course, most children are geniuses and they are *so excited* to go to school. They can't wait to begin learning all of those wonderful things they've been dying to know. Their smiles are big, and either their little bodies can't keep still because there is so much to see and do and say *or* they sit perfectly still, not moving a muscle—just in case the mere act of breathing causes them to miss something. That was my daughter, Siobhan.

I will never forget her first day of kindergarten. Siobhan had loved preschool, but she was even more excited about starting kindergarten at “the big kids’ school.” She had been in the building numerous times because her two older brothers went there, and I was on the School Commission. I pulled up to the curb and opened the car door for her. She jumped out, yelled, “Bye, Mom!,” and took off running into the building. I stood there, alone, with my arms outstretched and my lips puckered—waiting to accept that traditional, first-day-of-school good-bye hug and kiss. I went to her classroom to say good-bye. There she sat, at the table where her picture was taped, wearing a grin so big I thought her cheeks would explode. She sat straight and tall with her hands folded on the table—waiting. Let the learning commence!

That is how most Black children begin. They know something wonderful is about to happen and they bring with them an insatiable curiosity about the world around them, an unwavering focus on things that capture their interest, and an expectation that all the answers to their unlimited questions will be revealed—on the very first day! Just like most of us, Black children gravitate naturally toward interesting and intriguing activities and topics presented in ways that draw on natural learning instincts and preferences. So if all children are geniuses, you may be asking why this book focuses on the genius of Black children in particular.

It is our responsibility as educators to capture the interest of Black children and cultivate the natural genius they bring to our classrooms, but as our population continues to diversify, I often find that teachers are overwhelmed trying to incorporate the learning needs of so many children into the classroom experience. The challenge for many teachers is that the children in their classrooms represent many races, ethnicities, cultures, and languages—sometimes as many as fifteen different language groups in one classroom. In Seattle, children from the Horn of Africa alone (for example, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti) represent the second-largest group of dual-language learners in the public schools. Many teachers can't imagine what it would take to create a classroom that addresses the needs of such a diverse population. They commonly respond to the situation by saying, "I don't even know where to begin," and then stay with the teaching methods and strategies that are most familiar to them. Unfortunately, this means many children's learning needs and preferences will go unmet. When I'm coaching or mentoring teachers, I encourage them to address this challenge by starting with just one culture. Tackling fifteen cultures at one time can seem daunting, but anyone can take on just one.

I started with just one culture—my own. (After all, most people know their own culture best.) I first examined research (both classic and modern) on Black learning styles and the cultural socialization that informs many Black children's expectations in their learning environments. I then began providing professional development and training on the learning needs and preferences of children of African descent to early childhood teachers whose classrooms consisted primarily of Black children. In 2011, I worked with several teachers over the course of one school year to transform their classrooms by increasing the teaching strategies, methods, and approaches they used to include more of the elements Black children might expect.

Including these elements is important because, just like my daughter, most Black children enter learning environments thinking of education as something that belongs to *them* and they see themselves as active participants in *their* education. For example, many children begin school trying to answer every question, touch every item, and share every experience. I think they are pretty sure the teacher's main job is to answer

all their questions, hear everything the children have to say about the subject, and provide wonderful, exciting, interesting items to explore.

But by third grade, much of Black children's natural exuberance has been replaced by frustration and resignation. They begin to see education as belonging to the *teacher*, what the teacher does in her or his classroom. Children develop this attitude when the teacher repeatedly stops them from talking and moving, limits what they can touch and examine, and requires them to be still and listen to the teacher talk. Many children become bored, and children who are bored and unengaged in school may look for something else to do. I see the same result when grown-ups are bored or unengaged in trainings. I see adults standing, pacing, tapping, knitting, talking, texting, and scrolling through screens on laptops, phones, and tablets. Grown-ups rarely get in trouble for such behavior, but children often do. When teachers have a stronger sense of what is needed by the learners in the room, they will be better equipped to engage those learners.

This leads to another reason I chose to focus on the learning needs of Black children in particular. Often, Black children who are bored and unengaged may behave in ways that are disruptive or may simply stop participating. The result is familiar: increased disciplinary action on the part of teachers, underachievement on the part of Black children, and low expectations on both sides. The worst-case scenario is when neither Black children nor teachers expect much of each other. Most people (children and grown-ups) will actively participate in a learning environment when learning is presented in ways that make sense to them, ways that make learning natural and fun, that make learning relevant. When Black children are allowed to do what they do best, to do what comes naturally, they become thriving, actively engaged participants in their own learning, and classroom management "challenges" that result from boredom disappear.

Increasing children's engagement is especially critical and timely as we look for ways to address the academic achievement gap and the opportunity/access gap that exists for many Black children. By implementing different learning styles and multiple intelligences in our classrooms and expanding our understanding of more personality types/traits, we can create learning environments where Black children not only excel but also exceed our expectations. What if you could make what you

teach more accessible to Black children? What if you could provide more opportunities for Black children to learn more? You can, and this book will tell you how.

I will begin by describing who I am talking about here. Who are “Black” children? Obviously, there are many ways to describe children of African descent: Black, African, African American, West Indian, South American, Latino, Afro-European, and so many more describing those who are biracial and multiracial. There are also wide variations among children of African descent *within* ethnic groups based on a multitude of differences (economic, geographical, social, age, gender, political, and personality). For the purposes of this book I use the term *Black* to describe all children of African descent in the United States regardless of their individual ethnic backgrounds. In addition, I capitalize the pronouns “Black” and “White” because, in the case of race, we are talking about people not colors—and I strongly believe that when a word designates a group of people that word should be capitalized.

► APPROACH

This book will present strategies for changing learning environments for Black children, strategies that incorporate more of the learning styles, multiple intelligences, and personality types/traits you learned about in early childhood education classes. You’ll develop ways to combine and implement strategies we already know are effective so that Black children’s learning needs are better met and supported. Since Black children are one of the largest populations in our early education and K–3 classrooms, when we effectively support the learning potential of a group of children this large, we will have a significant impact in our profession and on Black children’s futures. By gaining a broader understanding of what it looks like to expand your teaching potential in ways that are culturally relevant for one population of students, you will find it easier to move to another cultural or racial population of children and do the same. This approach doesn’t narrow your teaching. It expands it to embrace *all* students and learning styles. This is doable! I will include familiar ideas and lots of concrete examples that aren’t hard to implement. When you start small you will not be overwhelmed by the thought of creating the “ideal” learning environment.

► ORGANIZATION

This book is organized in two parts. Part 1 will provide you with background and context by answering the following questions:

- What, in general, do I need to *know* about learning styles, multiple intelligences, and personality types/traits?
- What is the relationship between *culture* and learning styles, multiple intelligences, and personality types/traits?
- What does the *research* tell us regarding learning styles, multiple intelligences, and personality types/traits in Black culture?
- Given the research, what tend to be Black children's *preferences* when it comes to teaching and learning?
- Where is the *disconnect* that seems to result in an academic achievement gap?
- How can I increase cultural *relevance* for Black children and eliminate the disconnect?
- What role does teacher *efficacy* play?

Part 2 will focus more on applied strategies and will answer a different set of questions:

- What are the *elements* of an appropriate learning environment for Black children?
- What *strategies* can I implement to expand my teaching?
- What can I do to make the classroom learning *environment* more engaging and relevant for Black children?
- How can I improve and strengthen my *relationships* with Black children, their families, and the Black community?
- How does this approach *look* in a classroom?
- How can I *incorporate* this approach into an existing model or curriculum?

When you finish this book, you will have a clear pathway for creating learning environments that support the learning styles and preferences of Black children and, in the process, increase access to more learning

opportunities that will help all children, that will lift all boats. It's not a curriculum but a way of thinking about how to implement a curriculum differently. It's about what you do and what it looks like.

► CAVEATS AND CONTROVERSIES

As I thought about this book, I was constantly reminded that a number of caveats and controversies need to be addressed up front and head-on:

Isn't good teaching good for everyone? Why would Black children need different teaching?

The more traditional perspective believes that good teaching is good teaching—that what good teachers learn and master works well for many (or most) students regardless of culture. Unfortunately, this belief could lead to an approach that says no one is different, that teachers can be successful with students from culturally, socially, and linguistically diverse backgrounds without having any special knowledge and skills beyond what they were taught in our teacher education programs. Of course, this line of thinking means that it's okay if you were not taught methods, strategies, and techniques for working with every one of the learning styles or multiple intelligences or for how to interact with different personality types/traits. Everyone should just try harder. Teachers should do more of what they already do, and children should try harder to learn from what they are presented.

But *should* both teachers and children just “try harder” and keep doing what hasn't really worked for either for a very long time? My perspective is that each child, just like each grown-up, is unique and learns differently. As grown-ups, we are better able to articulate our learning preferences and advocate for ourselves. If need be, we can even suggest (and expect to receive) changes in our learning environment to accommodate our needs, such as asking for a PowerPoint presentation to go with a training lecture. Children are less able to articulate their learning preferences, so we as teachers must recognize their needs. Good teaching is, indeed, good teaching; however, teaching that is most successful and most effective includes pedagogy and practices that address a variety of learning needs.

Does this lead to stereotyping or segregating Black children?

Stereotyping happens when we decide that one trait, preference, or characteristic applies to all members of a group. Segregation happens when we decide that those who learn differently cannot learn together. Yet those who oppose the perspective that there are learning styles based on race and culture have a valid concern. Many are concerned that identifying learning preferences based on race or culture will result in stereotyping Black children and may even lead to segregated classrooms. But by deciding that you *cannot* implement something because it applies to Black children is itself segregating or stereotyping. It would be like saying there *is* a way to teach Black children more effectively, but to do so would be singling them out. You are not stereotyping children by applying teaching strategies that let them use their preferred method of learning. And there is no need for segregation if you can effectively teach children who have different preferences. You won't have to single out or segregate if you expand your teaching repertoire by gradually incorporating into your classroom more elements of what you learned about learning styles, intelligences, and personality types/traits in your teacher education program. You will simply be increasing your ability to meet the learning needs of more children.

Is there really a Black learning style?

During the 1970s and '80s, a lot of research was conducted primarily by African American scholars who were concerned about the ability of most schools to meet the learning needs of Black children in the wake of desegregation. The bulk of this research centered on the cultural context of learning; researchers assumed that there is a body of knowledge, skills, processes, and experiences that is different from what is taught in most traditional teacher education programs; and that this knowledge is essential for preparing teachers to be successful with culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. Much of this research provided the impetus for the revision of the teacher education department at Pacific Oaks College Northwest in Seattle, where I served as campus dean for six years. Our focus was on providing our teacher interns with

the knowledge base they needed for successfully educating children of color, English language learners, and children from low-income communities. We took what was a traditional teacher preparation program and added coursework regarding the cultural, social, linguistic, and political contexts of teaching and learning.

Indeed, when we look at early childhood learning environments around the world, we see a broad diversity in approaches to teaching and learning. It stands to reason that in a nation as diverse as the United States, a nation that grows more diverse each year, we will also find diverse learning preferences—including the learning preferences of Black children. Many Black children also learn in ways distinctly different from those of other cultural groups, which makes it imperative that our early childhood schools and programs expand their instructional approaches to accommodate these differences. We must remember, however, that not all Black children are alike. There will always be differences based on family income, country of origin, location (urban, rural, suburban), and parent education levels. Even highly individualized factors such as physical abilities must be taken into account just as they would be for any other population of children.

What about factors outside the learning environment? Couldn't those cause Black children's academic underachievement?

Some suggest that differences in academic achievement can be attributed to the social and economic challenges faced by many Black children and that it would be better to focus our attention on housing and nutrition. There is no doubt that circumstances outside school and work can have an effect on our performance inside school and work. Remember, Maslow's hierarchy tells us that both children and grown-ups need regular, sustainable access to food and housing in order to focus adequately on school and work. And in the United States, approximately 26 percent of Black children are negatively affected by a lack of adequate food and housing (Iruka 2013).

Yes, food and housing challenges must be addressed, but not necessarily by classroom teachers. Classroom teachers have very little control or influence over children's home circumstances. They do, however,

have control and influence over children’s learning circumstances. Access to stable, high-quality, engaging learning environments is even more crucial for children in need. Circumstances outside the classroom can change for any child at any time, but circumstances inside the classroom can counteract negative factors by providing children with the excellent education they will need for their futures. Waiting for outside challenging factors to improve before attacking the achievement gap inside doesn’t sound like a very promising academic plan for children in need.

► CONCLUSION

All of the perspectives noted here warrant keeping in mind. Not all Black children are the same, and stereotyping is rarely beneficial. Black children in large, urban cities will be different from those in suburban cities and those in rural areas. They will differ in socialization, assimilation, and academic preparation. On the other hand, cultural groups share “patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization” (CARLA 2014). We must be careful to pay attention to group similarities and individual differences. I think there is too much “either/or” here. Who says that if we learn more about Black learning preferences, we have to create classrooms that are only for Black children? We currently limit learning preferences in our classrooms to a narrow range that meets the needs of a few, and we put *all* children in these classrooms. My approach would be to incorporate more learning preferences into *every* classroom. Now that we have established some basic premises, let’s move on to learning more about Black children.

PART 1

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

What does the research say regarding learning styles, multiple intelligences, personality traits, and their relationships to cultural influences in general and in Black children in particular? The next three chapters will provide more background and context to answer this question and take a look at the disconnect between what we know and what we do. Chapter 1 provides an overview of some programs and approaches that have been successful in educating Black children to high levels of academic achievement. The features and elements these learning environments share in common will serve as a backdrop for incorporating more culturally responsive learning preferences into classrooms (chapter 2) and for examining teacher efficacy and how teachers can increase their understanding of cultural influences on teaching and learning (chapter 3).



What Do We Know about How Black Children Learn?

WHILE THERE IS QUITE A BIT OF RESEARCH outlining the learning preferences and patterns of Black children, we must keep in mind that not all Black children are the same, nor do they all have the same learning preferences and needs. Many Black children are comfortable with or have adapted to the more predominant strategies, methods, and approaches currently used. However, many Black children are not as successful in such environments. No one approach to teaching and learning works for everyone, be it a traditional, familiar approach or one that addresses the needs of specific populations of learners. In education, one “size” does not fit all, and the most successful and effective learning environments provide a broad range of approaches or “sizes,” making it possible for more learners to find a good fit. For this reason, we must assist teachers in incorporating more learning styles, multiple intelligences, and personality types/traits into their classrooms. In chapter 2 I provide an overview of some of these learning styles, multiple intelligences, and personality types/traits. The more of these teachers can incorporate into their classrooms, the more learners they will accommodate.

► WHAT WORKS

Those who have studied the connection between culture and instructional approaches provide examples of classrooms and schools in which teachers have studied students’ cultures and then revised curriculum or developed new curriculum that is more relevant to those cultures (Delpit 2006; Gay 2000; Ladson-Billings 1994).

Education has always been highly valued in Black communities even during enslavement when simply learning to read was considered a crime

punishable by death, beating, maiming, or, at the very least, being sold away from family. There has always been an internal, persistent drive to learn, to know more, resulting in the establishment of a remarkable system of Black schools and colleges. The Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States have produced many of the Black legal, educational, scientific, and medical professionals in our country and continue to do so (Postsecondary National Policy Institute 2015; U.S. Department of Education 1991).

In addition to the HBCUs, numerous other examples of schools and curriculum, historically and currently, have provided an excellent education for Black children. Several examples are outlined briefly below. I selected them because I had heard and read good things about them and because a number of Black families had selected these programs and schools for their children as alternatives to what else was available. All of them (according to their “self-reports,” websites, books, and documentaries) have had positive results with Black children. Many of them share some common features that are compared at the end of this chapter and are related to the research discussed in chapter 2. Please bear in mind that these features are not exclusively successful with Black children. In fact, many children benefit from having these elements in their learning environments. However, you will see from the research presented in chapter 2 that these elements benefit many Black children as well.

HighScope

HighScope’s mission is “to lift lives through education” while inspiring educators to inspire children.

The School and Population

HighScope began in 1962 as an experimental curriculum with 123 Black children at the Perry Preschool in a housing project in Ypsilanti, Michigan. The children were between the ages of three and four and attended the preschool for one or two years.

The Curriculum and Pedagogy

HighScope has a number of key features and elements:

Active Participatory Learning: Children have direct, hands-on experiences with people, objects, events, and ideas. They make choices, follow through on their own plans and decisions, and develop creative problem-solving ideas.

Plan-Do-Review: Children plan and make decisions about what they want to learn or work on during their Work Time. Then they are given ample time (at least thirty minutes) to put their plan into action, to actively engage in their own interests. At the end of Work Time, children review their plans, discuss how it went, and suggest changes for next time.

Key Developmental Indicators (KDI): HighScope has developed fifty-eight indicators based on eight curriculum content areas (approaches to learning, social/emotional development, physical development and health, language/literacy/communication, mathematics, creative arts, science and technology, and social studies). The KDIs are the basis of the HighScope assessment tool: the Child Observation Record (COR). To create the records, teachers take notes about children's behaviors, changes, and statements relative to each indicator to develop a fuller understanding of each child's development and progress.

Classroom Arrangement: HighScope classrooms encourage children to engage in meaningful personal and educational experiences. Numerous interest areas (including woodworking, computers, and outdoor areas) contain enough materials for multiple children to work at the same time and encourage choice.

Parent Involvement and Engagement: HighScope provides resources for parents (for example, Key Learning Experiences at Home—An Information Sheet for Parents) that explain how they can support the HighScope approach at home. In addition, home visits before school begins and multiple conferences during the year strengthen home/school ties. These activities allow parents/families and teachers to work together as a team.

Problem Solving: Children are taught a six-step mediation/conflict resolution process that HighScope has designed for children as young as eighteen months old.

Adult-Child Interaction: Adults and children are partners in the learning environment, and shared control is central to their interactions. Teachers are responsive, guiding, and nurturing while also looking for opportunities to challenge children’s learning and development.

The Results

The HighScope Educational Research Foundation has been tracking the original 123 participants for over forty years (HighScope Perry Preschool Longitudinal Study Project) and continues to find positive effects and influences over their lifetimes as a result of the practices, strategies, and approaches of the HighScope curriculum. According to *Lifetime Effects: The HighScope Perry Preschool Study through Age 40* (Schweinhart et al., 2005), Black children who participated at the Perry Preschool were more likely to exhibit the following characteristics:

- have higher IQs at age five
- be on target academically at eighth grade
- graduate from high school on time
- go to college
- earn higher wages
- be married and actively parenting their children (males and females)
- have medical insurance
- own a home

HighScope participants were less likely to have the following outcomes:

- be placed in a special education program
- receive social services such as welfare assistance and public housing
- be arrested for nonviolent crimes
- be arrested for violent, property, or drug crimes
- have challenges with substance abuse

In addition, the 2005 study included a costs effectiveness analysis indicating that for every \$1.00 invested in high-quality early childhood education, society saves \$16.14 in the cost of special education services, public assistance, unemployment, and dealing with crime. Research from the HighScope Perry Preschool Longitudinal Study Project has informed current educational preschool policy and planning, including the national plan of President Barack Obama's administration for expanding early education opportunities and the federal-state Preschool for All initiative.

HighScope's Perry Preschool Longitudinal Study Project is my favorite example of a research-based curriculum and an evidence-based school model. How HighScope's approach reflects some of the research regarding several learning preferences for Black children is presented in chapter 8.

Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP)

The Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) is a nationwide network of free, lottery-based, open-enrollment college-preparatory schools in under-resourced communities throughout the United States. KIPP schools are usually established under state charter school laws, and KIPP is the nation's largest network of charter schools.

The School and Population

KIPP began in an inner-city Houston, Texas, public school in 1994 when founders Dave Levin and Mike Feinberg launched a program to help fifth graders gain the skills and knowledge to be successful in college and in their communities. The following year, Feinberg developed KIPP Academy Houston into a charter school, and Levin went on to establish KIPP Academy New York in the South Bronx. The original KIPP Academies have a sustained record of high student achievement.

According to KIPP's website, more than 95 percent of the schools' students are African American or Latino/Hispanic; more than 87 percent are eligible for the federally subsidized meal program. Students are accepted regardless of prior academic record, conduct, or socioeconomic background. However, KIPP schools typically have lower concentrations

of special education and limited English proficiency (LEP) students than the public schools from which they draw.

The Curriculum and Pedagogy

The schools operate on the principle that there are no shortcuts to success: outstanding educators, more time in school, a rigorous preparatory curriculum, and a strong culture of achievement and support will help educationally underserved students develop the knowledge, skills, and character needed to succeed in top-quality high schools, colleges, and the competitive world beyond.

When a student is admitted to KIPP, a teacher or the principal sets up a home visit with the family and student to discuss the expectations of all students, teachers, and parents in KIPP. Students, parents or guardians, and teachers are all required to sign a KIPP contract agreeing to fulfill specific responsibilities, promising that they will do everything in their power to help the student succeed and go to college.

The program is organized to provide individual attention to students. The smaller, more intimate environment of the academy helps students feel more comfortable, and teachers keep better track of student progress. Interdisciplinary teams of two or more teachers work with the same group of students for a minimum of one year.

The Results

According to KIPP's 2014 "report card," 45 percent of KIPP alumni have earned a bachelor's degree and another 6 percent have earned an associate's degree, totaling over 50 percent earning a college degree. These results are from the early classes of students from the first two KIPP schools in New York and Houston. This is compared to approximately 22 percent of the general population of Black people eighteen and older in the United States who have a two-year or four-year degree and less than 1 percent who have advanced degrees (U.S. Census Bureau 2014).

Seattle Urban Academy

Seattle Urban Academy (SUA) is a small, independent school in Seattle, Washington, that began in 1989 as a small tutoring center. It is a division

of CRISTA Ministries, a parachurch organization focused on education, world health, and human services.

The School and Population

SUA serves twenty-five to thirty-five low-income students of color in grades nine through twelve. Most of these students have not been successful in public schools and have been suspended or expelled, or have dropped out. The school prides itself on achieving success with students considered troubled or at-risk for academic failure.

SUA students must:

- be fourteen years or older;
- have experienced academic failure in previous schools;
- want to work through their personal challenges and take ownership of their academic, social, and spiritual growth;
- want to graduate from high school and transition to higher education and sustained employment.

The Curriculum and Pedagogy

SUA creates a family environment by valuing each student's unique qualities. For academic support, students receive one-on-one support from teachers in addition to the individualized attention facilitated by small class size. This support provides students with the stability they need to graduate. Key elements include:

Spiritual Health: Teachers and staff are committed to helping students discover their identity, passion, and purpose so they can, in turn, contribute to the health of the greater community.

Academic Intensive Care and Mastery Standard: SUA is committed to helping students make up the one-to-seven-year gap in academic competencies that many of them face.

Social Growth and Maturity: Staff and students build relationships based on trust and deep caring to address the multiple risks in students' lives and provide resources that increase health and positive adult outcomes.

College Guidance: Because many SUA students are the first in their families to graduate to higher education, much focus is placed on helping students research and visit college campuses and completing admissions processes (college entrance exams, scholarship applications, and so on).

Career Development: To prepare students for employment, SUA provides career exploration, career fairs, job shadowing, and internship experiences based on students' skills, values, passions, and interests.

The Results

According to SUA's website, the school has had much success preparing its students for college and employment:

- 95 percent of SUA seniors graduate.
- 91 percent of SUA graduates go onto higher education or sustained employment.
- 65 percent of SUA students are employed (versus 25 percent of Washington State youth).
- 80 percent of SUA graduates who enter colleges or universities complete degrees (vs. 10 percent nationally for low-income students completing college degrees) (Calahan and Perna 2015; Executive Office of the President 2014).

These percentages are high, and the student population is currently around only thirty-two students; SUA's data are remarkable, however, considering that the students were on track to flunk out of public school.

Urban Prep Academy

Urban Prep Academies (also known as Urban Prep Charter Academy for Young Men or simply Urban Prep) is a nonprofit organization that operates three free, open-enrollment, all-male, college-preparatory, public charter high schools in Chicago.

The School and Population

The mission of Urban Prep is to provide a comprehensive, high-quality college prep education to young men that results in their success in college. Urban Prep was founded in 2002 by Tim King and a group of African American education, business, and civic leaders, and it received its first charter approval from Chicago Public Schools in 2005. It is the first all-male public charter high school in the United States.

Students are admitted to ninth grade through a lottery, with no evaluation of test scores or special needs. Some transfer students are admitted to grades ten through twelve. Approximately 85 percent of the students are low-income, and many are several grade levels behind in the core subject areas. Nearly all of them are African American.

The Curriculum and Pedagogy

Urban Prep structures its educational approach through four curricular and extracurricular “arcs”:

The Academic Arc: a rigorous college prep curriculum that offers sustained attention to reading, writing, and public speaking skills

The Service Arc: a focus on deepening the students’ sense of responsibility and identification of community needs by completing volunteer programs throughout the area

The Activity Arc: a focus on increasing students’ confidence, interpersonal skills, and leadership qualities by participating in at least two school-sponsored activities per year, such as sports or clubs

The Professional/College Arc: an emphasis on providing students with valuable professional experience by requiring them to spend one day a week in a professional setting. This focus serves to reinforce character and leadership development in students, and provides them with work experience. The College Arc provides college enrichment programs during the summer at national and international colleges and universities.

School Culture: Urban Prep promotes a positive school culture by emphasizing the “Four Rs”:

- Respect: Students and staff members address each other by last names (Mr. King, Ms. Carroll) only.
- Responsibility: Students are held accountable to a strict code of conduct.
- Ritual: Students participate in daily, weekly, and yearly rituals such as Community and Tropaia to reinforce feelings of community and self-worth.
- Relationship: Urban Prep issues each staff member a cell phone whose number is distributed to all students so that students can have continuous contact.

Urban Prep has other unique features that are integral to its mission:

The Pride System: Each grade level at Urban Prep is divided into six groups of twenty students, known as “Prides” (named for the school’s mascot, the lion). Prides (each consisting of students from multiple levels and abilities) function as smaller units within the school to provide each student with a mentor, as well as a peer-support network. Prides compete for points earned for good attendance and high grade point average, and through intramural athletic competitions. Prides may lose points for dress infractions, attendance violations, or other disciplinary infractions. The Pride with the most points is awarded the Pride Cup at the annual year-end ceremony, known as Tropaia.

Uniforms and Discipline: Urban Prep students must wear uniforms and follow a clearly communicated discipline program based on community and mutual respect. The school uniform consists of khaki pants, a white buttoned-down and collared dress shirt, solid-red school necktie, and black two-button blazer with an embroidered school crest.

Summer Programs: During the summer, students participate in academic, professional, and service programs throughout Chicago and around the world, such as summer programs at the UK’s Oxford and Cambridge universities, as well as elite stateside institutions including Northwestern University and Georgetown University. All incoming freshman must attend the summer program in August.

Athletics: Urban Prep campuses operate independent athletic programs that compete against one another and in the Chicago Public League.

The Results

Urban Prep’s motto is “We Believe”—a constant reminder to all (teachers, administrators, staff, board of directors, community members, donors, and students) to reject negative stereotypes of and low expectations for Black males. From 2010 to 2014, 100 percent of Urban Prep’s graduating seniors were admitted to four-year colleges or universities:

- 2010: 107 students admitted to 75 colleges
- 2011: 71 students admitted to 137 colleges (some accepted to more than one)
- 2012: 85 students admitted to 128 colleges (one was accepted to 14 different colleges/universities)
- 2013: 167 students admitted to 120 colleges
- 2014: 240 students admitted to 186 colleges

In 2006, the University of Chicago released a study reporting that only one-fifth of African American males in Chicago Public Schools would graduate from college (Roderick, Nagaoka, and Allensworth 2006). According to an Urban Prep April 8, 2014, press release posted on the school’s website, “80 percent of Urban Prep’s alumni are persisting in college.”

Westside Preparatory School

In 1975, teacher and education activist Marva Collins created Westside Preparatory School, a low-cost private school, specifically for the purpose of teaching low-income African American children whom the Chicago public school system had labeled as being learning disabled.

The School and Population

“Working with students having the worst of backgrounds, those who were working far below grade level, and even those who had been labeled as ‘unteachable,’ Marva was able to overcome the obstacles” (Society of Saint Pius X 2014). Marva Collins believed a dedicated teacher would take the failure of even one child personally. She felt that complaining about how far behind a child was or what the child hadn’t learned didn’t help the child. After all, it was the teachers’ job to catch children up and teach them what they didn’t know. Westside Preparatory teachers were expected to respond to children with love and positive feedback and never engage in negative programming. After thirty-three years, the school closed in 2008 due to insufficient funding (Jordan 2008).

The Curriculum and Pedagogy

Westside Preparatory School (WPS) curriculum was based on the Socratic method with a focus on inquiry and discussion. Teachers and students ask and answer questions as a way to stimulate critical thinking and to present diverse and divergent ideas. The pace and the rate of information are managed by the teacher to encourage student participation and engagement, which reduces discipline issues. With the Socratic approach there is little place for worksheets and inane busywork. WSP established an intellectual atmosphere with the following elements:

- a general attitude suspending judgment in order to examine reasoning
- abstract content that has different meaning to different students in order to aid discussion and challenge students’ logic

- teaching children to reason
- teaching, reviewing, and examining new words, called “the words to watch”
- a series of pertinent and thought-provoking questions as reading progresses
- predictions using logic, reasoning, and evidence
- teaching students to test their reasoning
- writing daily “letters” to authors or characters and writing critical reviews of works studied
- teaching children to refer to what they’ve learned to support their opinions

The Results

All WSP graduates entered colleges and universities, including Harvard, Yale, and Stanford. They became physicians, lawyers, engineers, and educators. “News of third grade students reading at ninth grade level, four-year-olds learning to read in only a few months, outstanding test scores, disappearance of behavioral problems, second-graders studying Shakespeare, and other incredible reports, astounded the public” (Society of Saint Pius X accessed 11 April 2014).

A Comparison of Programs

The accompanying table provides an overview of the curricular and pedagogical elements of the schools and programs discussed. I’ve included the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) because most were created at a time when African Americans were usually excluded from historically White colleges by law or prohibited from being educated at all.

CURRICULAR/ PEDAGOGICAL ELEMENT	BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES	HIGHSOPE	KNOWLEDGE IS POWER PROGRAM (KIPP)	SEATTLE URBAN ACADEMY	URBAN PREP/ACADEMY	WESTSIDE PREPARATORY SCHOOL
Close, authentic, meaningful relations with Black families and communities.	Teachers know they are educating the future Black community. Need to educate future Black professionals in a racially segregated society. Family and community involvement and engagement go both ways—teachers involved with Black families and community, who are both equally involved with teachers.	Resources to help parents understand child development and how it is fostered at school and home. Conducting home visits and multiple conferences with parents each year. Parents and teachers work together to promote children's learning.	Home visits with families. High expectations for families.	Service to the community.	Service to community and international service.	Desire to better serve Black families and children in the Chicago Public School system.
Working with students considered at-risk or behind and educating them to high levels.	Black students barred from White colleges by law or practice.	Began with low-income children from a housing project. Individual child observations based on curriculum goals.	A high percentage of educationally underserved, African American students who are eligible for free/reduced-price lunch.	Students who have experienced academic failure and are considered "troubled" by previous schools.	Almost 100% African American males, high percentage of low-income	Low-income African American children considered learning disabled, unteachable, and coming from the worst backgrounds, children working far below grade level.

CURRICULAR/ PEDAGOGICAL ELEMENT	BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES	HIGHSOPE	KNOWLEDGE IS POWER PROGRAM (KIPP)	SEATTLE URBAN ACADEMY	URBAN PREP/ACADEMY	WESTSIDE PREPARATORY SCHOOL
A school and classroom sense of community, family, and belonging.	Small class size at many. Strong alumni ties. Shared experiences of racism and discrimination.	Children learn to solve and resolve their social conflicts with each other in peaceful, respectful ways.	Small environments. Teachers have the same students for a year minimum.	Small classes. Community “family” and environment where everyone belongs and is supported.	Multilevel and multiability “Prides” to create smaller units. Active participation in sports. Discipline based on community and mutual respect. Respect. Peer support.	Collins’s promise to every single student that she would not let them fail—no dropping out allowed.
Commitment to teaching students who need support and a belief in the teacher’s ability to do it.	Strong drive to educate African Americans. High teacher efficacy.	Belief that a child-centered curriculum based on child’s interests would increase academic achievement and future success.	No shortcuts to student success. High expectations for teachers. Culture of doing everything in your power for student success and understanding that you have a lot of power.	One-on-one Personal attention. Academic “intensive care.”	Teachers, staff, administrators, board of directors, community members, and donors believe in their students’ potential.	Belief that teachers can catch children up and teach them what they don’t know.

CURRICULAR/ PEDAGOGICAL ELEMENT	BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES	HIGHSOPE	KNOWLEDGE IS POWER PROGRAM (KIPP)	SEATTLE URBAN ACADEMY	URBAN PREP/ACADEMY	WESTSIDE PREPARATORY SCHOOL
High expectations for students and a rigorous, challenging curriculum.	Very high expectations for educating future professionals. Degrees cover a variety of content areas (e.g., professional, technical, and academic).	Adults assume children can solve problems creatively and master critical content in the process. Creative arts.	Rigorous curriculum. Culture of achievement and support. Preparation for quality schools and a competitive world. High expectations for students. Interdisciplinary teaching teams.	Expectation of content mastery.	Rigorous curriculum that prepares every student for college. Focus on reading, writing, and public speaking.	Challenging curriculum. Intellectual atmosphere. Introducing vocabulary, definitions, and meanings before engaging with content.
Holistic social and emotional development of students.	Understanding of students' cultural and social experiences.	Encourage conflict resolution and problem solving.	Intimate environments so students feel comfortable.	Focus on students' skills and passions. Integrating students' spiritual health. Focus on Social development.	Character and leadership development. Rituals such as school crest and Pride Cup. Active participation in clubs.	Respond to children with love and positive feedback, not negative programming.
Strong, positive teacher-student relationships.	Shared control of classroom. Strong teacher-child relationships and nurturing interactions.	Teachers promise to do everything in their power to help students succeed.	Relationships based on spiritual health and committed adults.	Every staff member is given a cell phone and the students are given those numbers.	Dedicated teachers take the failure of just one child personally.	

CURRICULAR/ PEDAGOGICAL ELEMENT	BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES	HIGHSOPE	KNOWLEDGE IS POWER PROGRAM (KIPP)	SEATTLE URBAN ACADEMY	URBAN PREP/ACADEMY	WESTSIDE PREPARATORY SCHOOL
Students take responsibility for their learning.	African Americans' strong drive to be educated when faced with discrimination and exclusion.	Children take responsibility for their learning through Plan-Do-Review critique of their own work and their own learning.	Students promise to do everything in their power to succeed and go to college.	Students take ownership of their academic growth.	Students take responsibility for conduct and academic persistence.	
Students actively engage and participate in conversations, discussions, and learning.		Hands-on experiences with a wide variety of objects and materials that reflect children's interests. Active and participatory learning. Daily routine offers stimulating variety.		Career exploration aligned with students' values, passions, and interests.	Pride competitions for academic achievement	Discussion and inquiry. Testing and examining students' logic and reasoning. Questions, evidence, and investigations. No worksheets and "busywork."

► COMMONALITIES

All of these schools demonstrated the ability to successfully educate Black students to high levels of academic achievement. All of these schools also took into consideration the cultural and learning needs of the Black children they served. Some of the approaches and characteristics they demonstrated in common are as follows:

Start with the students, where they are right now. Almost all of these programs took on Black children whose academic needs were considered too challenging for traditional programs. Successful programs appear to build on each child's current strengths and use them to support new learning.

Give Black children who are behind more than a year of learning in the academic year. Children who are behind will stay behind if they are only offered one year of learning each year. To catch up in two years, they will need 1.5 years of learning in an academic year. I'm talking about basic math facts. Any child who is behind will need more of what the other children are receiving if they are to catch up. In the schools discussed, bringing children up to grade level involved one-on-one teaching, academic intensives, high expectations, a belief in the student's ability to catch up, and probably some extended day/year options.

Focus on learning more than teaching. Children's learning was seen as the primary outcome of teaching in all of these programs. Yes, teaching is vital, but in successful programs, if learning isn't happening, teaching isn't happening.

Let children move! Many of the programs outlined here built in opportunities for movement through experiential learning, hands-on projects, experiments, creative arts, and sports.

Embed culturally relevant or Africentric curriculum, pedagogy, and engagement. Many of the programs embedded Black cultural perspectives and approaches into the curriculum by sharply increasing the amount of engagement they had with Black families and the Black community.

Learn more about Black history, Black culture, and the Black experience both in the United States and in Africa. Black people have a history and experience on earth that spans thousands and thousands of years. Successful programs did not limit their knowledge of Black people to the last four hundred years of their experience in the United States alone.

Let children talk! Let students use all the words, structures, mispronunciations, and creative grammar they have to offer in whatever language and/or dialect they use to offer them. Open-ended discussions between children and teachers and between children were common. Teachers weren't the only ones talking and did not appear to be talking most of the time. While children do need to become proficient in academic English, having a strong base of their home language to build on is probably a good place to start.

Let children solve problems. A review of all the curricula, teaching strategies, activities, and interactions showed many opportunities for Black children to debate, discuss, debunk, defend, figure out, work through, prove, and explain much of what they are learning.

Questioning is encouraged. A culture of inquiry and collaborative learning was prevalent. Teachers did not always have all of the answers, and there was much evidence of opportunities for teacher and children to explore topics and learn together.

Have high expectations. Teachers in these programs expected Black children to achieve at the highest levels, so they did. This was true even with children who were behind in key content areas and considered at risk of academic failure. In most cases, failure was never considered a viable option, good enough wasn't "good enough," and a D may be a passing grade but it was not an acceptable grade.

Respect Black children, their families, and their communities. It was clear in most of these programs that the teachers respected the families and communities to which Black children belonged.

They did not see themselves as needing to “save” Black children from their families and communities.

Everyone thinks he or she can. These programs demonstrated a lot of efficacy. Teachers believed they can teach Black children effectively, so they did. Children believed they could learn from their teachers, so they did.

Here is what you do *not* find in the schools and curricula described:

- silent, still students and learning environments
- the extensive use of worksheets or other tasks requiring long “seat time”
- mind-numbing, inane busywork
- “objective” and impersonal relationships
- a preponderance of teacher talking—teaching as performance art
- the belief that Black children can’t learn at high levels
- the belief that Black children’s culture puts them at a disadvantage
- the belief that Black children’s environment contains too many challenges for them to learn
- limiting the amount of contact with Black families to short teacher conferences
- a preponderance of focus on children’s weaknesses
- making Black children feel that their language and culture are inferior
- “helping” Black children by lowering expectations regarding their achievement

► MOVING BEYOND

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of programs and schools that seem to work well for Black children and shared some of their commonalities. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be widespread use of these successful learning approaches with Black children on a more regular basis, particularly in large, urban school settings. For example,

HighScope practices are found to have lasting, positive effects for Black children who are considered at risk, but I am unable to find evidence of the widespread use of those practices with low-income Black children today, even though the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention listed HighScope as one of its programs that work to reduce bad behavior in youth (U.S. Department of Justice 2000).

It is time to bring it all into the light—and into your classrooms. In chapter 2, we will look more closely at the research on learning preferences, the influence of culture on those preferences, the influence on the learning preferences of Black children specifically, and what happens when there is a disconnect between learning preferences and the learning environments we commonly see.