

How Do You Get Black Kids to Learn? You Just Teach Them!

A Conversation
with **Anitra
Pinchback**

by **Jill Hearne**

Educators have long searched for the right mix of programs, materials and training that would increase academic achievement for poor and minority youth. One teacher seems to have found this mix, the right recipe for learning for poor minority students. Miss Pinchback, a teacher at the African American Academy in Seattle, WA, taught her primarily poor and all black students using a variety of strategies that produced impressive record-breaking results. At this Seattle public school, eighteen out of her 20 students met the state standard in all areas, Reading, Math, Writing, and Listening, on the rigorous state assessment. In the Seattle School District itself, percentages of black students meeting standards in each area were: Reading (47.7%), Math (31.1%), Writing (45.4%) and Listening

(42.4%).

Detractors of standards based education believe the expectations are too high for many students and teachers in low-performing schools attribute low achievement to variables in the home and life of the child. Miss Pinchback's results contradict these assumptions. This is a conversation regarding her philosophy, methods, and beliefs.

Q: What motivated you to think you could get all your students to learn to the extent they could meet the rigorous standards of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning?

I knew I could make a difference. I looked back at my own schooling and saw many students who went to school with me be unsuccessful. They did not achieve in school and they went on to be unsuccessful in life.

What was different for me? I had a teacher who had a no nonsense approach to education. Her approach was, "I expect you to do the work!" There was not a different set of rules for different children. She had high expectations for all of her children. So I took that approach when I started to teach. I know we all come with different ability levels but I had to tap into each child's strength.

Looking back, the true joy was tapping into these strengths: for instance, I had children

who could read, but could not write or do math. There was rarely one child who had all the skills so I had to do lots of grouping and used peer tutoring often.

Q: What do you feel the parents' perceptions were before you started having these conversations about their children's learning?

Parents would tell me that they believed their child to be a good student when, in fact, they were not strong. They had gotten this impression from previous teachers who did not expect as much as I do. I would show them their child's strong area but be truthful about what they could not do. That awakened a lot of parents. They had not realized what was expected in the new standards-based system in terms of reading and writing and problem-solving skills.

This conversation with parents about their child's skills did not take place at an individual student level before I would show them what they were supposed to be able to do. First I used the state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) web site, anchor papers and good papers from previous students to illustrate the 4th grade level work expected. This created a realization of what was required and expected. Parents' realization

factor was a great aid to me. It was, perhaps, the first time parents comprehended the work to be done and became conscious of where their child was actually performing academically.

I told the parents, “We need an intervention plan to get your child to standard.” Did any parents say it was too hard? Sure they did! Parents were very concerned. They would ask me, “Will they ever get it? He/she is so far behind....” I had those conversations frequently, and often multiple times with the same parents.

I worked with the parents on their behavior and attitudes. I told them that it’s a lifestyle change for the family. There needs to be an environment for learning. I had to teach what that looks like. I told my parents that it means the TV is off. They need to be sitting directly next to their child while they work on homework. There needs to be a time every day for help and attention.

[Q: How did you teach parents their active role in their child’s learning?](#)

Each year, I meet with my parents during the first 2 weeks of school. I cover the learning expectations and standards, and set a tone. I make it clear that my goal is to have each student at standard. We go through each math strand and what is

expected in terms of student work. I also explain fluency rate in reading. I show parents where their children are currently performing. We have a writing assignment on the first day of school. I can show this to parents and then explain where we are going during the year with learning skills for an expository paper as well as a narrative paper. I am very explicit with parents about which is which. The reason I teach the parents is so that when their child takes the writing assignment home, then the parents can use same terms.

[Q: What did you do with parents less able to help their child?](#)

I was relentless! I kept students in my room for help during P. E. and Music, as well as lunch and recess if necessary. When a child has little support outside school, I try to touch the child more deeply so they can get the confidence to do their own work at home.

I have a “no excuse!” policy. It is 100% of the class. This becomes our class theme and culture. This year, starting over with a new group of students, I just had a conversation with my kids last week. Eighteen took a test; there were 11-A’s, 4-B/C’s, and 3 did not meet the standard. I send home class averages so parents can see how the class is doing. That way they can keep up with how their children are doing. I explain that I

need to talk to all parents whose children did not meet standards.

I make it clear to the students that if you show up, you are expected to perform. I find that even as early as fourth grade, kids will say, "But you don't mean me..." My reply is always, "I do mean you. It starts with you. You have to want to get this education for yourself." One of my themes is called "watch what you are happy for." I talk with the students about what makes them happy and proud. Are we happy because we can write a good paragraph or because we can shoot baskets? Both are good skills but you need a balance of talents; academic skills as well as physical and social skills.

[Q: When did you realize your own classmates in school were not achieving at your level?](#)

When I was in grade school and high school, I was a frequent winner of citizenship and achievement awards. I won achievement awards at UW, as well. My mother sent clear messages to me that this (education) is the key to my future. I continuously embed that message in my classroom. We have continual refrains and phrases that promote success and hard work. I remember the key of education from my childhood. I will ask them, "What is one thing you will take from Ms. Pinchback?" My children repeat the

phrase, “Education is the key to my future”.

I did not intend to be a teacher; I wanted to be a doctor. My belief in God led me to realize that if you want to make a difference you need to go into education. I am continuously reminded of how I can provide a better life for myself through education. I have developed more self-awareness now because of my lifelong learning notion. If I can be a part of that in another child’s life, it will stay with me.

Q: What are some of the specific strategies you have used successfully in your classroom?

I use a lot of the [National Urban Alliance](#) (NUA) strategies for cognitive development. For instance, I use graphic organizers, thinking maps, to help students organize their thoughts. (See also New Horizons' section on [graphic organizers](#)). I found thinking maps to be paramount to students’ success in writing.

Other specific programs included [Anita Archer’s Rewards](#) (word attack and rate development strategies), Eric Cork's *Write Now*, and Augusta Mann’s [Dancing Definitions](#). (See [Resources](#), this page, for more information).

It is a problem when you work in a school that does not have a curriculum linked grade to grade, because students carry the skills

forward, but the next class may not use the same materials or teach the same way. Currently I am having difficulty because the teachers at the grade ahead of mine are not using similar strategies. Recently, I had one of my former students come to me and ask if he could get a copy of the Eric Cork materials, because he had a writing assignment to do and he wanted to do his best. He wanted extra guidelines and assistance.

I use directed instruction when I want students to gain subject area knowledge. In math, I use manipulatives a lot. I build my lessons so that children know what they can and can't do with the materials and manipulatives. I teach them how to take care of their own possessions, as well as school supplies and materials.

Q: One of the unique strategies you used was continuing with your students through summer school. How did you decide to make this commitment?

I had already made the commitment to looping, so I was following my students from grade three to grade four. Committing to summer wasn't that hard for me to do. When I first got my students in third grade, three-fourths of them were struggling readers. They had very low skills in math, as well. I sent packets home during winter

break and spring break. I made up a schedule for the parents to follow: your child does pages 10 through 15 from 9:00 A.M. to 11:00 A.M. Let them take a break and then do pages 19 to 23 in the afternoon. I had frequent communication with all the parents and they appreciated the detailed directions and structure. Some kids were still not where I wanted them so I adopted Anita Archer's program for struggling readers and thought, "Why not take the children for summer school?" The school had a reading grant that funded summer school. It just made sense to me.

I promoted summer school as the smartest thing a kid can do because you are getting a head start. It's not something you are doing because you are in trouble. Parents had the same idea, that it was for struggling kids only. So I explained to parents, "why not let me watch them instead of day care?"

[Q: Many teachers might be reluctant to make this commitment to student learning. Are there other ways you connect with students?](#)

All my parents have my phone number. If they have a problem, they call me. Yes, it's a sacrifice, in a way. My children and families know that if they have a problem, they can call Miss Pinchback. Instead of a problem being too

challenging and their giving up, they would call me. If I'm out at a restaurant, or doing something social, I will say, "mark that problem and we will deal with it first thing in the morning." Then I would help them, and they all know that.

Q: Do you feel your success can be replicated, or is it unique to you and your personality?

I don't take this personally for me. I really personalize my students' success. It did not happen just because the children stayed in the same classroom for 2 years. There were lots of factors. There definitely needs to be a curriculum focus and more time on task. The curriculum in the classroom needs to match the assessments. I use a very classic lesson design and work hard at protecting core instruction from external factors that do not have an academic focus. If students do not do their homework or if one is having trouble learning a skill or concept, they may miss assemblies, recess, basketball or football. If this is necessary, so be it!

I focus on using data to change what I am doing. I don't just look at the numbers, or the test scores and forget it.

Q: Is it easier to begin this year with a new group of students now that you know your students did meet the standards once?

Yes, they have some guiding information from the previous class's parents. The articles in the paper have helped people understand my goals. Even prior to the publicity, a lot of parents wanted their kids in my classroom so the rapport I had established with my previous parents added to this. I do try to establish rapport with the other teachers at my grade level. I want all students to bond with their teachers. I try to tell parents my goal is to team with my teammates.

Organizational structures and support are important. Accountability is a word we hear often but we don't do much about it at the classroom level. We are always looking for outside accountability but as educators we should have inside accountability, too. You should do it because it works, not because someone is looking. The biggest "Aha!" for me was watching a child struggle and then perform. She did her first chapter test, She learned what it means to follow multiple step problems and do graphs. She only missed one! Her joy as she realized, " I did it, Yeah! Hard work pays off!"

One thing I want to share is that it is paramount to get parents on board. I promised my families that I would stay with them through high

school. I committed to be a mentor to the families. If they have questions about the school system, or need help connecting with school problems, I will help. At the end of the third grade year I had a celebration to emphasize the value of learning. It took a great deal of fortitude to accomplish, but I had dinner catered, a video presentation of students working in class, and standards visible as well as my summer school expectations. At the end of 4th grade I had each child thank their parents for providing consequences for learning. It was the “last goodbye” for leaving my class. One of my reasons for doing this was to bring education back into the home. Parents appreciate this because I teach that every year is a stepping-stone. We need to treat each year as a step toward graduation. Parents reported that their children watch the video of their working in the classroom over and over.

[Q: Do you believe you can continue this dedication in the future?](#)

This year, I celebrated with the students who met all four standards on the WASL. It is a life commitment for me. I believe I can make a difference. Yes, I can! This is part of my life plan. I know I am walking in my purpose.

Resources:

Dr. Anita Archer
Rewards Reading Program:
Sopris West
<http://www.rewardsreading.com>

Erik Cork
International Write Now Inc.
Write Now!
P.O. Box 984
Missouri City, TX 77459
1-888-279-9428

Augusta Mann
Dancing Definitions
<http://www.successfulteachers.com/strategies/dd/dd.html>

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National Urban Alliance
<http://www.nuatc.org/>

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