

A MODEL FOR SUPPLEMENTARY EDUCATION

(This was originally written in 1978 after we had been operating for five years. I have taken the liberty to update some of the discussion.)

INTRODUCTION

“If a man dies shall he live again? We do not know. But this we do know, that our children’s children live forever and grow and develop toward perfection as they are trained. All human problems, then, center in the Immortal Child and his education is the problems of problems. And first for illustration of what I would say may I not take for example, out of many millions, the life of one dark child.”

The preceding quotation is from W.E.B. DuBois’ introduction to the chapter “The Immortal Child” in his book, *Darkwater*. The “problem” he refers to is still with us today. Education has always been a major concern of Black people throughout our existence in America. History provides us with ample evidence of this. During slavery, we would devise ingenious schemes to teach ourselves. When this was accomplished, we would teach others whenever possible. During reconstruction we were instrumental in the institution of public schools in the South. During the official era of segregation, we exhorted our children to get all the knowledge they could get. It was this period that saw the establishment of the Black colleges that to this day continue to turn out many of our learned Black people. During the de jure desegregation and even through the period of integration (which includes the present), the exhortation continues.

In view of this demonstrated interest in education, it is little wonder that we are seriously concerned about the sorry state of affairs of the education of our children. Many studies have been made, papers written and speeches given on the reasons why. We organize to get our people, and/or other people sympathetic to our cause, elected on school boards. We form community groups to advocate (along with civil rights organizations) on behalf of our children; many distraught and frustrated parents send their children to private schools.

In spite of these efforts, the masses of our children still remain undereducated. Clearly, all of these actions concerning education are necessary, but obviously not sufficient to ensure a decent education for our youth.

Although this discussion on education can go on and on, what is needed is to turn our attention to some possible remedies. Here we analyze an existing program that we submit as a model.

THE MODEL

The purpose of the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center, Inc., is to offer enrichment and remedial tutorial services in academic skills to children in the Kansas City area. For its first few years the Center concentrated on reading and mathematics. Since then it has expanded its offerings to science and Information Technology (IT).

The remedial reading program caters to grade levels two and up. Phonics, word recognition, pronunciation and reading comprehension are all dealt with according to the level of the respective group.

At one point most of the teachers in our reading program were teachers from the local school district. Sometimes we have been able to get parents and other interested persons to help. At this point our staff consists mainly of area professionals (from a variety of fields). All of the participants enjoy working with children and this more than anything else manifests itself in their ability to inspire and motivate the students. We have a small library which includes books on Black history and biographies of Black giants that are readily accessible for the children. (We now have material that can be accessed online. See: <http://www.duboislrc.org/>, <http://www.duboislrc.net/>, or <http://www.duboislrc.net/admin/tutorial.html>.) This is in keeping with our philosophy of trying to encourage them to read at home. We were counseled by Dr. Jeremiah Cameron, the retired head of the English Department of Penn Valley Community College, who happens to be a product of Kansas City's inner city, that children will read whatever they are interested in. As a result of his counsel, we try to encourage the parents to subscribe to magazines that the children find interesting while at the same time informing the parents of meaningful and relevant material that may interest them as well.

Marked success has been achieved in the reading program and the parents express their satisfaction with their children's improvement.

The mathematics program also services students from the second grade through high school. Occasionally we will serve college students (space permitted). It has four basic levels, and is thus far the most successful and comprehensive program of the Learning Center. The first level concentrates on the arithmetic skills of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. The second level includes fractions, decimals, percents and the arithmetic of signed numbers. Our third level includes tutoring students in the quality high school math courses from algebra and above. Finally, we have in our fourth level what we call general math. It is for older students who need help with basic arithmetic skills and who we feel should not be placed in sessions with younger students.

The mathematics tutorial staff is comprised mostly of local professionals in accounting, computer programming, education, engineering, and other areas. Each participant works on the level that he/she feels comfortable with and/or according to where the need is. All of us try to encourage and motivate the students. If a student exhibits an accelerated level of comprehension our teachers act as catalysts to insure the potential of the child. This has resulted in some students being advanced in mathematics in their particular school; some have been able to skip a level. As children begin to develop and indicate an area of interest, we direct those students to someone in that field and counsel them as to what courses they should take to prepare themselves for it.

When students enroll in either of the programs they are administered a small test by office personnel volunteers to determine what level they should be placed in. And the parents are given an orientation to explain what the Learning Center is all about.

Although this is the basic framework of the Learning Center, each of the programs is in a state of constant evolution to meet the needs of the children and make the changes necessary for improvement.

(Since this was originally written we have established a science program that caters to middle and high school students. We have also established a computer science department that services middle and high school students as well as adults. You read more about it at:
<http://www.duboisl.org/press/WOOD/>.

An Ideological Analysis*

*By the very nature of the program, the ideological views that follow are not necessarily shared by every participant. Some may not even be aware of them. It is, however, fair to say that they represent the kind of thought behind the program's conception. The fact that the desire to see the uplift of our children transcends whatever philosophical differences that do exist between the participants is noteworthy.

Upon examination of the ideology and philosophy behind this program's conceptualization, one becomes cognizant of Black studies at work. If the goal is to build an organization, institution or movement designed to help liberate our people (education of our youth is such a goal), it is wise to consult our history to see if and when others, anywhere on the planet, have done so. Historical analysis illustrates that the successful liberation movements of the world, Africa in particular, provides us with models to emulate. Although the situation is markedly different between the continent and here, there are significant parallels that can be drawn. And by making use of some of the maxims of the liberation movements, tailored to fit our situation, we were able to initiate and sustain a viable program that we believe could contain the seeds of a movement.

Let us delineate some of the pertinent characteristics for a successful movement and discuss how they apply to us.

1) Dedicated and studied leaders:

Che Guevara describes a guerrilla fighter as one who “shares the longing of the people for liberation,”¹ and Amilcar Cabral says that we should “Learn from life, learn from our people, learn from books, learn from experience of others. Never stop learning.”²

We seek out persons who express concerns over the plight of our children, persons who identify with the problems and believe they can do something about them. The voluntary aspect of the program weeds out people who will only work if they can pick up some “chump change.” Hence, we only attract people who are in concert with our common cause—dedicated to the purpose of helping our young people. This dedication moves us to observe, reach out and analyze ways we can improve and expand upon our purpose. One can notice a camaraderie emerging among the participants. This in conjunction with the many and diverse skills and abilities represented, expand the potential of the program to the imaginations of those involved.

2) Realizable objectives and a flexible strategy to achieve them:

Cabral: “It was by basing ourselves on concrete knowledge of the real situation in our country that we established the tactical and strategic principles and our guerrilla struggle.”³

Many people reason that the establishment of private schools is the answer. Indeed, there are many in existence through the nation already. However, there needs to be methods devised to address the needs of the overwhelming masses of our children. In the urban centers of this country, one observes large concentrations of Black people. These areas also contain the industries that employ most of the trained Black people from colleges, technical schools, etc., many of whom are already involved in tutoring students. However, these endeavors and their results could be maximized if the time spent with one student was spent with several. This service could also be optimized if it were organized and orchestrated. Some time ago it was stated in *Black News* (an east coast publication) that area college professors (and perhaps others as well) volunteered to conduct lectures at the Uhuru Sasa Schule (Freedom Now School). It appears to be realistic to assume that there is a large enough percentage of teachers, professionals, technical people, parents, interested persons, et. al., to initiate this kind of undertaking.

In addressing the question of facilities, I am reminded that a few years ago (late sixties or early seventies) Nikki Giovanni wrote something to the effect of: “When I look at the churches, bars, etc., in our community, I see more than churches, bars, etc. I see buildings that our communities control that could be used to educate our children in.”

The minister and the congregation of the churches wherein the Learning Center were housed (before we acquired our own building) were community-minded enough to allow their facilities to be used for a program such as ours. The churches benefited from the notoriety they received. Other community groups that the churches allow to meet on their premises, can also benefit from the equipment that we are able to acquire, e.g., the chalkboards were be used for teaching Sunday school and during various kinds of meetings.

As the work of the Learning Center spreads and we continue to grow we hope to be a model for other churches, community centers, etc., who are interested it working with young people.

3) Mass support:

“Always bear in mind that the people are not fighting for ideas, for things in anyone’s head (theory & ideology). They are fighting to win material benefits (goods and/or services), to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children ...”⁴ Amilcal Cabral

Whereas this program doesn’t have any material goods to offer (at least not yet), it does have a service that most, if not all, of the people in the community can identify with. Hence, we have children from all types of homes participating in the program—from the well-to-do to the poor, children with good, average and poor academic backgrounds and environments. This program has people with diversified backgrounds working harmoniously together. The key is that the objectives of the program transcend all of our petty differences. In this sense, the Learning Center itself is a model for all those people who feel as we do that Black people can and should work together. The very nature of our objectives compels us to seek out people with various tools and skills to offer. The objectives can also cause volunteers to respond. Especially, when they see how children (in many cases their own) can benefit.

Notice that when a professional athlete tells a young boy that he has good athletic ability, that boy is elated, inspired and motivated, more so than if his own parents told him. The same thing occurs if a professional scientist were to tell a young student that he/she has good scientific ability. We all have a watchful eye out for talented children. We try to develop, encourage and direct them to the best of our ability. As relationships evolve between us and our students, they begin to open up and ask us questions about our jobs, etc. What do engineers, programmers, accountants, etc., do? What is it like working in industry, etc.?

As a result of these relationships, the concept of a Black engineer, etc., is no longer an abstraction as it has been for most of our young people.

Many of our young people feel that acquiring a college education will make life a “bed of roses.” The fact is that we college educated Blacks go through the same hassles in industry and other jobs as we as a people experience in all other aspects of our lives. For the same people that run industry, run the country. Even though progress is being made, it is being made through

struggle (recall Frederic Douglass's "No Progress Without a Struggle" speech).

However, as Cabral alluded to, the reason why parents keep bringing their children back to the Learning Center, and community people get involved, is because they can see the progress the children are making (i.e., a service). They do not come because the philosophy of the Center nor the philosophy of the people in it. But if you have an idea or philosophy that you think is workable it is incumbent upon you to try it out. For as Kwame Nkrumah has stated, "thought without practice is empty."⁵ He also said the "practice without thought is blind."⁶

In order for us to make our program a success it must correspond to the reality and needs of our community. As we move forward, enhancing our successes and eliminating our failures, the ideology, philosophy and theories behind our program forge ahead. For "correct" ideas, in the words of Mao Tse-tung, "comes from social practice, and from it alone..."⁷

4) Live off the land; self-sufficiency:

"As the guerrilla struggle develops it will be necessary to arrange supplies from outside the limits or territory of combat. At the beginning the band lives solely on what the peasants have..."⁸ Che Guevara

All us have seen programs deemed worthwhile by our community go under due to lack of funds. This generally occurs when these programs were federally funded or funded by some agency. As it usually happens when federal money gets tight, these agencies "money gets funny," or the people controlling the purse strings get attitudes that conflict with those of the people running the program, funds often get cut or dropped altogether. Even while the funds flow, they often have strings attached to them that can stifle the development of a program in the direction its participants consider relevant.

With these historically graphic examples before us, it is clear that we need to devise new approaches that circumvent "foreign control." Revolutionaries must live off the land. Revolutionary movements must be sustained by the people. For us the land is our community, the people are the residents therein. We must become like revolutionaries, *urban guerrillas*, if you will.

Any type of qualification necessary to make a program like ours work is contained right here in our own community. The same can be said of facilities. What is needed is to pull it all together. So we sought out a minister with a church that could facilitate our endeavor who, along with the congregation, wanted to see such a program implemented. We sought out people with the necessary skills who were willing to work. We sought out parents who wanted their children to learn (also students who wanted to learn). Together we put our ideas into practice, believing that as long as the minister and his congregation were willing to volunteers their church, capable people were willing to volunteer their services and the parents were willing to bring their children (and children were willing to come) that external forces could not deter us.

In the early days we relied solely on the community support and our wits. The mathematics component of the program began under the aegis of the local Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) chapter. With its help and the hustle of its participants we were able to secure many of the supplies we needed: pencils, paper, chalk, erasers, etc. The church, St. James Gregory United Methodist Church (at that time) in Kansas City, Missouri provided classroom space and chalkboards.

About a year earlier the youth fellowship board of the Paseo United Methodist Church (at that time), whose pastor was also a member of the local chapter of SCLC, instituted a program entitled the W.E.B. DuBois Reading Center. As the mathematics program grew it took on an impetus all of its own. Its demands became too large for the local chapter of SCLC, which had other programs and commitments to oversee. So the mathematics program moved its position to the Paseo United Methodist Church, which had the better facilities of the two churches, thus, merging with the reading program renaming the joint effort the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center.

At the outset it was estimated it would take about five years before this concept would capture the imagination of the community. Too much exposure too soon would cause an influx of students too large for our personnel to handle. So we maintained a low profile. Thus, we acquired our students by word-of-mouth. Even at that we had to try to recruit enough personnel to handle the increasing enrollments.

Our five year projection appears to have been accurate. We had gained popular support somewhat rapidly. People came forth to offer their help, and funds came in from various sources. However, we did not accept funds

with strings, and/or unacceptable conditions attached to them. We were determined to stick to our objective to remain as independent as possible in terms of influence from forces outside our community. For as Sekou Touré (former president of Guinea, West Africa) said, "... that which is not done by the people cannot be done for the people..."⁹

REFLECTIONS, OBSERVATIONS AND PROJECTIONS

"At the same time as you transmit your knowledge and skills to the black community, you would willfully or inadvertently be organizing the black community and infusing it with new values. Your mere presence in the slums would constitute a role model for the black child to emulate in the effort to cope with his social deprivation."¹⁰ Nathan Hare

An objective around which people can be organized is necessary to induce functional unity. Such an objective should be important enough to the people for them to put aside their petty differences in order to achieve their goal, i.e., the desire to achieve the objective should transcend their differences. The greater this desire is over the differences, the stronger the bond that secures the unity. And as Black studies illustrates, the desire to have our children educated can and does create such a bond. Where differences have occurred, with regard to the education of our children, they have been invariably over the means, not the end. What is needed, then, is to institute the means around which progressive people of similar minds can coalesce. The W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center is such an institution.

As work of the Learning Center spread, people came forth to help, offering all kinds of needed skills—academic, managerial, secretarial, etc. The list of parents inquiring about enrollment continues to grow. As the interests in certain academic areas are generated, and we find people who can and are willing to teach them, we establish a new session. As a result, we were able to incorporate sessions in science and information technology (IT) in addition to our reading and mathematics sessions.

However, we had learned that when instituting new programs it may prove wise not to try to do too much too soon. Our plan was to start small, as we did with the mathematics and reading program, working with a few students and gradually grow as we developed.

On the drawing board we had plans to set up ways to help students acquire financial aid in furthering their education, and providing scholarship information. We also made plans to offer a variety of computer skills. This list could go on and on, for we are limited only by our collective imagination.

With regard to Nathan Hare's dictum above, we must strive to kazi pamoja (work together), for only pamoja tutashinda (together we shall win). As Black adults who are considered to have "made it" it is incumbent upon us to bring our skills to the people, especially our young people: for the way for them to acquire knowledge is for them to be around it. And there is little argument that knowledge is the power that can provide our freedom. Knowledge is the key that opens locks that incarcerate us in an oppressive/exploitive society.

Our children need a sense of direction provided for them by people who they can see truly care about them. We need to spend as much time with them on an organized basis academically as we do with league baseball, football, basketball, boy scouts, girl scouts, choirs, dance groups, modeling, etc.

After all, these are our children and the responsibility for their educational welfare falls upon all of our shoulders. In working together within our community to help our youth, we help ourselves. As Samora Machel said, "Solidarity is not an act of charity, but mutual aid between forces fighting for the same objective."

—— A Luta Continua (the struggle continues)

NOTES

1. Guevara, Che: *Guerrilla Warfare* p.32.
2. Cabral, Amilcar: *Revolution in Guinea* p.88
3. Ibid p.138
4. Ibid p.86
5. Nkrumah, Kwame: *Consciencism* p.78

6. Ibid p.78
7. Fremantle, Ann: *Mao Tse-Tung: An Anthology* 0.303
8. Guevara, Op. cit p.74
9. Touré, Sekou, *Black scholar*. May, 1972. p.13
10. Hare, Nathan, *Black Scholar*. May/June 1978. p.18

Special thanks to the following musicians (listed alphabetically) whose music provided the atmosphere conducive for writing this assessment.

Lester Bowie and Phillip Wilson: *Duet*

Ron Carter: *Piccolo*

Leroy Jenkins, Sirone, Jerome Cooper: *Revolutionary Ensemble*

Don Pullen: *Montreux Concert*

Sun Ra: *A Tonal View*

Cecil Taylor: *Nefertiti, The Beautiful One Has Come*