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Reviewed by Dorothy Handfield
University of Southern California
United States

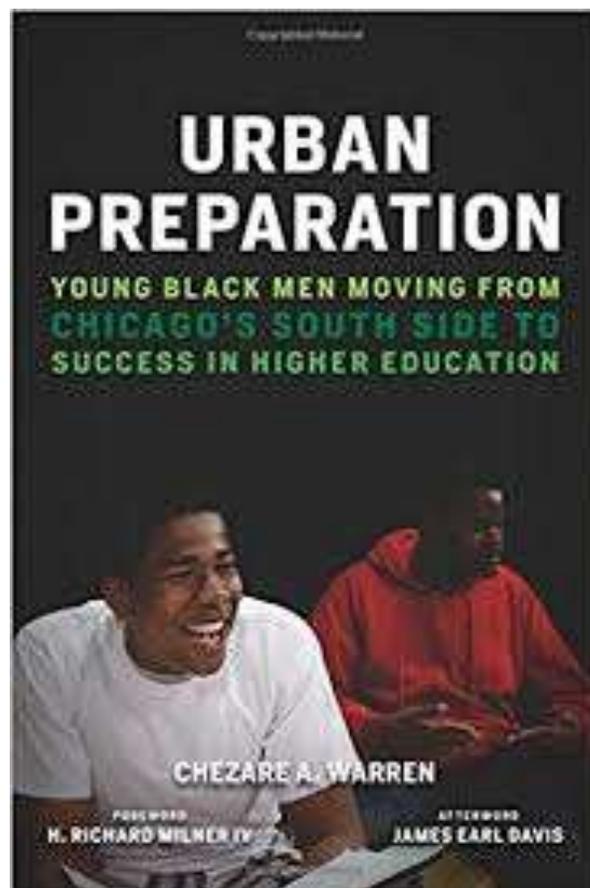
In *Urban Preparation: Young Black Men Moving from Chicago's South Side to Success in Higher Education*, Chezare A. Warren addresses the ongoing and complex issue of educating urban Black males. As an urban educator and founding teacher of the Urban Prep Charter Academy for Young Men (UP), the first all-male public charter school within the United States located on the South Side of Chicago, Warren asks questions that members of the education community continually ask themselves:

How can schools increase the student achievement of Black male students?

Why do the college enrollment numbers for Black male students continue to stagger below the college enrollment numbers for students from other demographic populations?

How can educators in urban Pre K-12 schools ensure that urban Black male students are college ready and college graduates?

Warren wrote his book for urban educators. One of his chief aims is to explore the types of



schooling environments, experiences, and conditions that will most likely narrow the opportunity gaps for urban youth and the implications of these influences for young Black men and boys' academic success and positive race and gender identity development. Warren also was committed to focusing on the impact of urban education on Black male students. He uses the conversations with former UP students who attended college as his primary data source. These students were members of the first entering freshman class at UP in 2006 and graduated from UP within four years in 2010. These men provided their personal interpretations of their experiences as Black male students at UP and as Black male residents of the South Side of Chicago. In candid and thought-provoking conversations, these men shared how and why they applied to UP as freshmen, what they learned academically and socially while they attended UP, and what skill sets were needed to prepare for and graduate from college.

From the onset, Warren captivated this reader with the book cover, picturing two Black male students. Despite sitting in the midst of a dark background, one student is jovial and laughing. The other student appears to be engrossed in a profound discussion. Both Black males are neatly dressed and groomed. Warren's depiction of Black males as presented on the cover offers a dramatic contrast to the pervasive social view of Black males as criminals, gang members, or high school dropouts.

Warren challenges his readers to refute education reform ideology that dictates how Black males need to be "fixed" (p. 1), and that Black male students need to transform into their white majority male counterparts to become successful. As a result of this ideology, the men featured in this book discussed the stigma of living in the "hood" (p. 48) and being successful. They explained how they never viewed residing on the South Side of Chicago as a negative. In contrast, the

communities on the South Side sharpened and developed their awareness of impediments that can lessen Black males' abilities to become successful. Drawing on the work of Yosso (2005) and Strayhorn and colleagues (2013), Warren uses the theories of cultural wealth and childhood struggles to substantiate his thesis and the statements of the men. Cultural wealth should be used to analyze, understand, and recognize the valuable skills, knowledge, and abilities students of color bring to school (Yosso, 2005). For example, students of color utilize numerous social and psychological critical navigational skills to maneuver through structures of inequality permeated by racism (Yosso, 2005). Strayhorn, Johnson, and Barrett (2013) argued that young Black men are prepared for the struggles that they face later in life due to the struggles that they experience as children. Thus, communities of color are not broken. We should value these students' experiential knowledge of the policies, cultural norms, and practices of institutional racism that continuously reinforce discrimination (Yosso, 2005). As a consequence, Black male students have the abilities to thrive in various educational settings.

In the last chapters of the book, Warren explicitly outlines how urban Pre K-12 grade schools should tackle the education of Black male students. The author states that no single stakeholder group is responsible for the failure of Black males in school. Nonetheless, schools play a critical role in the expansion or restriction of access to education opportunity for Black male students. Therefore, urban Pre K-12 grade schools should implement three approaches: address notions of success, develop a school culture, and build relationships.

First, schools address notions of success through policies and practices that can either improve or impede the education of Black male students (p. 167). Success is viewed through the conversations and activities with the Black male students, and the goal is to

have students as the co-creators of their educational experience (p. 167). Second, it is preferable to develop a school culture that demands, expects, and celebrates academic rigor, especially for Black male students (p. 169). Third, interpersonal relationships with peers, school agents, family members, and community members are essential for Black male students (p. 170). School relationships are pivotal in determining how Black male students experience school and make meaning of those experiences (p. 170).

Even though Warren gives a straightforward, clear depiction of the accomplishments, triumphs, challenges, and obstacles in the creation of UP, I wonder if the three approaches that he outlines for urban Pre K-12 schools were also utilized at UP. Consequently, I could not resist re-reading sections of the book with the perspective of the three approaches. In particular, I re-read Chapter 3 – *UP Years 1 and 2: Schooling Environment*. This chapter provides background knowledge on the development of UP and gives the reader insight into the expectations of and the reactions from the incoming students. The reader also has the opportunity to view the commitment of the UP educators. I questioned if UP implemented the three approaches with consistency.

It appears unlikely that UP consistently considered its Black male students' contribution to UP's meaning of success. Similarly, it does not seem evident that Black male students had a voice in their educational experience, nor that UP's educators and students had meaningful and intentional conversations regarding the meaning of success. In Chapter 2, Warren zoomed out to discuss the goals of success from the educators' point of view. It was intentional and strategic to brand UP as a college preparatory school for young Black male students who reside in some of Chicago's most neglected Black communities (p. 65). In its branding, UP featured young men

“properly” dressed in pants belted above the waist, white shirts tucked in, ties, blazers, and black shoes (p. 66). The young men also wore low haircuts and showed clean-shaven faces (p. 66). The image presented of young men who attend UP is that of students on the track to become “successful Black men” – middle-to-upper-class, Christian, heterosexual, well-spoken, college-educated Black men (p. 66).

Contrary to UP's promotion of success, the men did not want to attend UP as freshman high school students. During the conversation, the men explicitly stated their resistance to the uniforms. The men especially expressed their lack of interest in wearing a tie every day. Many of the men shared that they did not know how to tie a tie before enrolling at UP. The men explained the contrast of attending a co-ed school versus an all-male school. They confessed that they were paranoid about attending an all-male school because they associated an all-male school with homosexuality (p. 72). Moreover, their realization of following rules had consequences. Despite UP's intent to build a brand of successful, scholarly Black males, the school failed to have detailed conversations with its students that justified the rationale behind designing a college preparatory school.

I had additional doubts about the notion of success. Warren mentions that in the early years of UP there were a few staffing concerns. At a faculty meeting, Warren overheard another Black male educator say, “I hope we don't have any gay boys at this school” (p. 96). Moreover, there is an ongoing lack of female employees at UP. Within the first year of UP's inception, two female educators left the school (p. 97). Warren, however, fails to explain what happened in these situations, which may have also created anti-Black male conditions within UP. The male educator who openly hoped not to interact with homosexual male students did not create an accepting learning environment for any UP student who questioned his

sexuality. Readers do not learn if this educator was terminated from UP or continued his employment. Warren also did not mention if UP hired additional female employees to replace the female educators who separated from UP because of the inconsistencies of UP values and pedagogical practices of the male colleagues and superiors in the school. I wonder if there were policies and procedures that addressed the aforementioned examples of low expectations of success.

Conversely, UP exemplified positive school culture and interpersonal relationships. As part of the culture of UP, students recited the motto “We Believe” (p. 82) on a daily basis. The graduates stated that after saying the motto so many times each school day, they began to believe what they were saying and wanted to live by the words (p. 82). UP also created an incentive program for students, which according to graduates, encouraged their intrinsic motivation to succeed. UP assisted its students in building intrinsic motivation that continued with the men as college students. The men admitted that they reached the stated goals because the accomplishments became their rewards.

Interpersonal relationships are an important element of the school community and are important for young Black men and Black boys in high school (p. 170). While attending college, the men yearned for the bonds on campus that reflected the bonds at UP. The students at UP were divided into Prides, where the structure of Pride was to take care of one another. The students recanted, “I am my brother’s keeper” (p. 83). This concept was also a component of the school’s creed. A faculty member led each Pride. Mr. Dickens was one particular faculty member who the men recalled fondly as “the father who we did not have at home” (p. 83). Other faculty members who positively interacted with the men were Mr. Boston and Mr. Young, role models because they were “family guys” (p. 88) who maintained jobs.

Due to these interpersonal relationships, the men gained male role models who portrayed “a successful Black man” (p. 87).

In *Urban Preparation*, Warren took a purposeful look into UP and its social, emotional, and educational systems that supported the development of Black male students. Like Warren himself, urban educators fight against the fast-paced glitz and false dreams portraying urban street life with positive images of Black males who have exceptional lives due to the pursuit of higher education. Urban educators may personally understand the disadvantages of living in extreme poverty and high-crime neighborhoods and attending chronically low-performing public schools. Yet, urban educators may not openly admit to the struggle of creating and maintaining a quality educational experience that is conducive to success for our Black male students. As a fellow urban educator, I continually struggle to comprehend the emotional needs of Black male students simply because I am a woman and fail to grasp what it means to be a Black male. Nonetheless, Warren allows us to visualize the possibilities of an education system that encourages its disenfranchised students.

Warren shares what is possible when dealing with the perpetual crisis of providing a quality education to all of our urban Black male students. Black male students can be successful beyond high school and into college. Not only do readers of *Urban Preparation* receive a purposeful view behind the foundation of UP, but they are able to analyze how Warren’s conversations with the former graduates may be the platform to blaze a trail for additional conversations about the revitalization of urban education. Most importantly, readers will realize that our Black male students are crucial stakeholders in our schools and must have a voice in their own educational experiences.

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About the Reviewer

Dorothy C. Handfield is an urban educator and administrator. Dr. Handfield recently earned a Doctorate of Education from the University of Southern California. She has 20 years of experience in urban school settings and serves the children of Newark, New Jersey, as an Elementary School Principal.

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