

# Marva Collins, Her Method, and Her ‘Philosophy for Living’

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**M**arva Collins, who would go on to develop her own educational method and empower students in urban Chicago, was born on August 31, 1936 in Alabama. She surmounted one obstacle after another to become one of the world’s most famous educators. Her highly effective, controversial pedagogy was so distinctive that it became known simply as “the Marva Collins Way.”

Collins adored her father, who deeply influenced her. He was a hard-working, proud, and successful businessman in the black community of racially segregated Monroeville, Alabama. He read literature, newspapers, and poetry with the young Marva each night, and she often helped him open and close the grocery store he owned. That combination of daily reading, personalized attention, and strong work ethic would inspire her life’s work.<sup>1</sup>

After graduating in 1957 from Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia with a degree in secretarial science, Collins sought a job as a secretary. She explained, though, that “none of the private companies wanted to hire a black secretary.”<sup>2</sup> So she took one of the few jobs open to an educated black woman in the 1950s American South: She became a teacher.

Collins found that she enjoyed teaching secretarial skills at Monroe County Training School. There, she learned how to teach through trial and error, recalling what best helped her to learn, avoiding the mistakes some of her own teachers made, and taking seriously the feedback she got from the school’s principal. Even so, after two years at that job, she moved to Chicago, holding that it would help her develop independence from her father.<sup>3</sup>

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In Chicago, Collins first worked as a medical secretary. She soon fell in love, got married, and, in time, had three children. Finding that she “missed the classroom . . . the excitement of helping students discover the solution to a problem,” Collins applied for a teaching position in the Chicago public school system.<sup>4</sup> Although she had no teaching certificate, because of a teacher shortage she was hired to teach second grade.

Collins’s lack of a teaching degree worked to her advantage—and to that of her students. She trusted her own experience and disregarded the Board of Education’s teaching guide, which prescribed the “look-say” method to teach reading, simplistic Dick-and-Jane books with lots of pictures, and dull workbooks that drilled “skills” without teaching students how to think for themselves. Ignoring all of this, Collins developed teaching methods that truly worked. She used phonics to teach reading, incorporated literary classics and poetry into the curriculum, facilitated in-depth discussions of the readings, had students memorize poetry and write papers for oral delivery, and used positive (rather than punitive) discipline to address misbehavior.<sup>5</sup>

Over the next fourteen years, the Chicago public school system declined sharply. After the 1968 riots, sparked by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Collins’s neighborhood (Garfield Park) became a ghetto. The ensuing “flight to the suburbs” caused a huge turnover in teaching and administrative staff at her school. Collins described the new staff as “a different breed . . . who really didn’t care or know what they were doing.”<sup>6</sup> The replacements slavishly followed the standard educational curriculum that Collins had rejected. Facing a bureaucratic teachers’ union hostile to her independently developed pedagogy, along with parent apathy and “teaching to the test” initiatives, she decided that enough was enough and resigned.<sup>7</sup>

From 1975 to 1976, Collins continued to refine her methods, teaching a handful of elementary students in the basement of Daniel Hale Williams University. She worked tirelessly with the “forgotten” children of Chicago’s ghetto, many of whom could not read and had been labeled “learning disabled” or “uneducable” or had been “written off as losers.”<sup>8</sup> She saw—as did the parents of her students—that *these* children, when taught with her methods, were able to learn at an accelerated pace, that they went from hating school to loving it, and that they gained self-confidence in the process.

To support her convictions, Collins sought hard data. She administered Stanford-Binet tests, which showed that all of the children improved significantly in reading and math. Indeed, these students—who had been labelled “learning disabled”—performed anywhere from one to four years above their current grade levels.<sup>9</sup>

Certain of her methods and of the positive impact she could make, Collins withdrew five thousand dollars from her pension, renovated the second floor of her own home, stocked it with secondhand desks and books, and launched the Westside Preparatory School. It began as a one-room, multigrade private school and opened its doors to eighteen students from impoverished families in September 1976.

Observers in Collins's classroom repeatedly were astonished by the high-level curriculum she developed for students ages three to thirteen. She began each year with essays such as Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and fables such as "The Little Red Hen." Students soon moved on to poetry, including works by Rudyard Kipling and William Wadsworth Longfellow. In time, they progressed to Plato's dialogues. By second and third grade, they were reading William Shakespeare's plays (*Macbeth* and *Hamlet* were student favorites) and reciting Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. With these under their belts, it was not uncommon for students to dive headlong into a seemingly unquenchable reading frenzy. And Collins kept hundreds of books on hand, suggesting just the right one for each student to read next. Each student wrote a report every two weeks about his latest book, presented it to the class, and answered questions raised by the other students. This sparked so much interest in reading that book that students vied to be next on the waiting list.<sup>10</sup>

To do the kind of reading Collins required in her school, students needed to be able to read well and fast. And Collins knew that the proper method for teaching reading is phonics. Collins was adamant about the efficacy of the phonics method—she spent countless hours on it in the classroom—and ardently opposed the popular "look-say" method.<sup>11</sup> No matter how long the word or how many syllables, phonics provides the tools to read it. In contrast, the look-say method requires students to memorize the shapes of words and to use pictures and other context clues when necessary. Collins pointed out this method's shortcomings: Memory is limited, so through the "look-say" method children's vocabularies are stunted dramatically. Whereas a student taught phonics learns approximately 24,000 words by the end of fourth grade, a student taught using look-say learns only about 1,500 words by then. And whereas a student taught using phonics knows with confidence how to read or spell the words in his vocabulary, a student taught with look-say often must guess and often guesses wrong (e.g., misreading "delicacy" as "delinquency" or "inert" as "inherent").<sup>12</sup>

Collins's students did not read great works of literature and poetry in isolation. She helped students to integrate lessons from different works and different disciplines. For example, during a discussion of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, the class shifted its focus to Greek and Roman gods, including Jupiter, which then led to a

science lesson on the solar system, which then led to a conversation on astronomers from Ptolemy to Carl Sagan, and on to the U.S. space program. Collins not only welcomed but often helped initiate this kind of organic discussion, recognizing that it helped students “see the flow of knowledge.”<sup>13</sup>

Rather than remain behind a desk, as so many of her public school colleagues did, Collins made her way up and down the aisles to check students’ exercises or essays or to stand by them when they worked at the board. She circled things that needed proofreading and patiently discussed mistakes with her students. In Collins’s view, making mistakes was not something to be ashamed of but was an unavoidable part of the learning process.<sup>14</sup>

Collins took a Socratic approach to discussing texts. She would ask questions such as, “Do you think that the little red hen was right not to share her food with the other animals?” “Why was she right?” and “Did the witches make Macbeth do evil?”<sup>15</sup> Her students offered their thoughts based on their own experiences with justice and free will, and they became comfortable debating one another. They learned not what to think, but *how* to think—and to back up their claims with evidence from the text and from their lives.<sup>16</sup>

Essential to Collins’s way of teaching was showing how much she cared for each student. She was as generous with hugs and praise as she was intellectually demanding. Her combination of care and challenge not only served to inspire, it also broke through the defenses of students who initially were resistant to learning, defused angry kids, and reinvigorated the withdrawn.

Many children had come to Collins broken, illiterate, and hopeless, desperately needing someone to help them understand the value of learning and tap into their potential. In her commentary on Ayn Rand’s essay “The Comprachicos,” Collins remarked on what happens to those who “are never taught to read, write, compute, or reason,” noting that “they will automatically hate themselves.”<sup>17</sup> She respected her students’ individuality and intellectual independence, even when they disagreed with her. She told all students every day that she loved them, regardless of any clash of opinions. She held that this made them feel visible and built their self-esteem. Soon, they would demonstrate through achievement why they were worthy of love, creating a positive feedback loop.<sup>18</sup>

Collins sought to bolster her students’ courage and ambition each day with inspiring and memorable phrases. These included “Success is not coming to you, you must come to it”; “If you can’t make a mistake, you can’t make anything”; “You have the choice, the right to choose what kind of person you want to be”; “I realize

this is my life to use or to throw away"; "You are not in school for your parents, for your teachers, or for anyone else. You are here for yourselves."<sup>19</sup>

Most fundamentally, Collins offered her students "a philosophy for living."<sup>20</sup> She helped them to develop their minds and enduring self-esteem. She urged them to be "literate lifters" who productively helped themselves, not "lazy leaners" who thieved or went on welfare, which she considered "just another form of slavery."<sup>21</sup> Echoing Rand, Collins held that "one is either a creator or a second-hand person." She emphasized that achievement and excellence in life require self-esteem, independent thinking, and self-interest. As she put it, "Trust yourself. Think for yourself. Act for yourself. Be yourself. Imitation is suicide."<sup>22</sup>

Collins believed in the vast potential of the individual and embraced the teacher's role in actualizing that potential. She likened herself to a Pygmalion who could "sculpt" students and who "cared enough to keep polishing until a shiny luster came shining through" or a Michelangelo: "Just as Michelangelo thought there was an angel locked inside every piece of marble, I think there is a brilliant child locked inside every student."<sup>23</sup>

Collins worked extremely hard and did not view her vocation sacrificially: "I do what I do very selfishly. . . . I wanted to create citizens in my own school whom I would want as my neighbors, whom I would want as my friends, whom I would want as my doctors . . . because they are precise. They take pride in what they do."<sup>24</sup>

Collins faced some opposition from the "progressive" educational establishment while teaching in public school, but attacks escalated soon after she started Westside Preparatory School. Some thought that it was useless to teach Shakespeare to ghetto kids, as they likely wouldn't need education beyond vocational training. Others argued that readings should be "relevant" and "lifelike," with content addressing issues such as teen pregnancy, drug abuse, crime, and sexually transmitted diseases. And others wanted her to teach "black pride" and "black history" separately from American history.<sup>25</sup>

Collins was undaunted. Eschewing parochialism, she defended her curriculum as an opportunity "to introduce . . . children to a world that extends beyond the ghetto of Garfield Park."<sup>26</sup> In Collins's view, it was important for the student to develop as an individual and as a capable "citizen of the world." She held that his self-esteem could come only from his choices and character, not from his skin color or socioeconomic status.<sup>27</sup>

Collins also agreed with some critics that the great books—such as Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Plato's *Republic*, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, and Jane Austen's *Pride and*

*Prejudice*—were indeed “over the head of the student reader.” And, she continued, “that is the purpose of reading them. We read to stretch the mind, to seek, to strive, to wonder, and then reread. We discuss the ideas contained in those books with others, and we temper our own thoughts.”<sup>28</sup> She held that nothing worthwhile would come easily and that school is a place to grow. The material she chose inclined students toward deep reflection and helped to build their character.<sup>29</sup>

On May 8, 1977, Collins and her students captured the attention of the nation. After reading a piece bemoaning how suburban high school students did not know who Shakespeare was, Collins wrote a letter to Zay Smith of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. She invited him to visit her class to see that her students not only knew who “The Bard” was, but that they could quote from his plays. Smith showed up unannounced the morning after he received her letter. He was amazed that four-year-olds were “discussing diphthongs and diacritical marks—calling them correctly by name” and third graders were “learning about Tolstoi, Sophocles and Chaucer.” When he interviewed some of the children, one girl told him, “When I went to my old school I didn’t learn anything. My teacher used to go around pinching our ears. Here somebody believed in me.”<sup>30</sup> Of course, Smith felt compelled to tell the world about this extraordinary experience.

His article sparked a flood of sympathetic letters and desperately needed checks to help support the financially strapped school. Collins also received the first of many invitations for paid speaking appearances to explain her pedagogy and the results she achieved. In 1979, CBS aired a *60 Minutes* episode about Collins, and donors quickly poured tens of thousands of dollars into Westside Preparatory School. With this, Collins moved her school to a larger building the following year, which enabled her to accommodate two hundred students.<sup>31</sup> Thousands of people from around the world traveled to see her “miraculous” teaching method. But Collins made sure to point out that “there were no miracles . . . only love and determination.” Good teaching was “simply hard work.”<sup>32</sup>

Collins was catapulted to international fame in 1981 with the release of Peter Levin’s film *The Marva Collins Story*.<sup>33</sup> It documents why she left public school to open Westside Preparatory School. The film earned Collins new admirers and critics. In 1985, the rock star Prince donated \$500,000 to help Collins open Westside Preparatory Teacher Training Institute.<sup>34</sup> This enabled her to teach her methods to thousands of educators, who would go on to use them in schools throughout America.

However, many public school teachers and teachers’ unions took Collins’s success as a rebuke. Some tried to discredit her, accusing her of fabricating students’ test

results and weeding out weak students. Several newspapers and television programs investigated the charges, finding them to be groundless. Collins and her method were publicly vindicated.<sup>35</sup>

Over the course of her forty-year career, Collins received numerous awards and honors. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush both asked Collins to serve as U.S. Secretary of Education. She declined both times, choosing instead to remain in the classroom, where she could spark her students’ love of learning.<sup>36</sup>

On June 24, 2015, Collins died in hospice care,<sup>37</sup> but her indomitable spirit lives on through those who thrived in her classrooms and, subsequently, in life. Many of them went on to good high schools, top colleges, and successful careers in business, medicine, law, education.<sup>38</sup> They embraced the principle of independence that Collins repeatedly emphasized: “We have to lead ourselves instead of looking for others to lead us. If we don’t think for ourselves, others will . . . do our thinking for us.”<sup>39</sup>

Thousands of students who had been written off as “unteachable” were able to lead meaningful, productive lives because one woman refused to give up on them. Few if any have better exemplified the power of a single independent educator. May a thousand Marva Collinses bloom!

## Endnotes

1. Marva Collins and Civia Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1990 [1982]), 32–38.
2. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 46.
3. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 46–48.
4. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 50.
5. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 50–52.
6. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 55.
7. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 53–72.
8. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 110; see, generally, Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 79–128, for an account of Collins’s 1975–1976 school year.
9. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 127.
10. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 121–23.
11. See, for example, Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 64–65 and 118–20.
12. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 51, 57, 59, and 118–20.
13. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 148; see, generally, Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 90–91, 122–25, and 147–59.
14. Marva Collins, “Educational Program and Philosophy,” Marva Collins Seminars, <http://www.marvacollins.com:80/philosophy.html>.
15. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 29–30 and 157.
16. Collins, “Educational Program and Philosophy.”
17. Collins, *Ordinary Children, Extraordinary Teachers* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 1992), 75.
18. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 22–30 and 80–92.
19. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins’ Way*, 22, 23, 31, 84, and 85.

20. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way*, 48.
21. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way*, 95 and 141.
22. Marva Collins, "Comments and Observations," Marva Collins Seminars, <https://web.archive.org/web/20141205093330/http://www.marvacollins.com:80/comments.html>; Collins, *Ordinary Children, Extraordinary Teachers*, 114.
23. Collins, *Ordinary Children, Extraordinary Teachers*, 106; Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way*, 192.
24. Collins, *Ordinary Children, Extraordinary Teachers*, 38–39.
25. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way*, 111 and 155–56.
26. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way*, 58.
27. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way*, 30 and 141–42.
28. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way*, 178.
29. Collins, *Ordinary Children, Extraordinary Teachers*, 33–35.
30. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way*, 160.
31. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way*, 161 and 194.
32. Collins, *Ordinary Children, Extraordinary Teachers*, 9; Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way*, 117.
33. *The Marva Collins Story*, directed by Peter Levin (Hallmark Hall of Fame Productions, 1981).
34. "Prince Donates \$500,000 to Marva Collins' School," *Jet* (November 4, 1985), 63. Prince also included Collins in the last fifty seconds of his 1994 music video for "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMnqtzUqTWA>.
35. "Epilogue," in Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way*, 211–14.
36. "Marva Collins," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marva\\_Collins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marva_Collins).
37. "Marva Collins, Renowned Educator, Dies at 78," *Chicago Tribune* (June 25, 2015), <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-marva-collins-obituary-met-20150625-story.html>.
38. Alex Haley, foreword, in Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way*, 1–2.
39. Collins and Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way*, 91.