

# The ~~rub~~, the CRUX, & the *onus*

## Understanding the interactions of public schools and bicultural parents

### The rub

A “rub” can be defined as an obstacle caused when the interaction of two or more factors conflict. The “rub” in America’s education system is sometimes caused by the interaction of the culture of public schools with individuals, families, or social groups who do not share that culture.

Educator Edward M. Olivos (2011) calls these persons, families or groups “bi-cultural.” Due to negative stereotypes, he sees this term as more authentic than “minority.” As well, Olivos describes these folks as living and “functioning” in 2 or more distinct cultural environments: the home and society. For students and parents/grandparents or guardians, it is home and school.

For example, we have a family’s or a student’s primary culture “practiced” at home and the dominant middle-class European-based culture of the main stream. The mainstream culture defines public education’s standards, curriculum, and what it means to be intelligent.

Our country, being a land of many cultures, has used schooling for the purpose of socializing children and adults into an American way of life and its common culture: the “melting pot” of *E pluribus unum*. In the early 1900s, public education in the form of compulsory schooling resulted from the interaction of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. The goal was the assimilation, or even acculturation of “bi-cultural” persons, families or groups into an American mono-culture. This continues to be the purpose of our public schools.

With regard to public education, the rub in school/parent relationships is caused by the interaction of these differences. To some urban students of all colors, school is oppressive, and the enemy. One’s identity is formed in opposition to it. Thus, these students “take pride in not giving in to school.”

For instance, various “frictions” occur when the language used by America’s many bicultural families in their homes and/or in the streets is different from the Standard English used in public schools.

Another way, explained by Olivos (2006), to look at “the rub” is that current public school-bicultural parent relations are a *paradox*. Such parents are expected to participate in school, yet not be too involved that they change the system or become part of the school or district’s power structure.

In many instances, when citizens realize there are limits to their power to participate in public institutions, they disengage. Bi-cultural parents, in particular, express their power by resisting the policies imposed upon them by the institutions of dominant culture such as their own public schools. They don’t show up at meetings because it’s a waste of time: their experiences tell them their involvement will be limited to basic volunteer actions, and they will be asked to endorse policy and practices without question in one-way conversations from school staff to them.

This creates a vicious cycle because the dominant culture can point to their “disengagement” as representative of the lack of involvement of bi-cultural parents.

### The crux

Crux describes the essence, the core of something. The “crux” of the matter here is basically the question: what are schools for? Specifically, what is the purpose of America’s urban schools with large populations of students from bicultural families? What is most important: who gets to decide what this purpose is?

Even more relevant, what is the role of bicultural parents and who get to decide? The crux of the matter is understood through these questions: what is the role of the parent who is also the taxpayer who pays the wages of all public school employees; and, who is not only the person who is the parent or guardian of the child/children in a public school, she/he is the constituent who votes in or out school boards and the state superintendent?

*According to these questions, parents are thus the very foundation of our public schools, yet in most cases they are consistently at the bottom of the school system's power structure. Appreciating the role of parents and the authentic democratic power they inherently possess offers school districts the most honest and viable parental support of public education.*

### **The onus**

Onus is the term used to describe a duty, a responsibility for something. The rub and the crux place the onus on the public schools to act. This paper suggests 4 actions.

**1. To look out for their own self-interests, parents will create a Parent University lead and funded by parents and so independent of any school district or education organization** (Parent Power, 2014)

Indeed, students need to be ready for schools, but schools need to be ready for the children of urban low-income families of all colors. Thus, a Parent University created and run by parents would not just focus on "parenting skills," but would provide families and their communities with their own tools and skills to effectively advocate for their children, and the self-determination of their communities.

This "citizen school" would be where persons and families would learn the rules of the game and how to become a part of school, district, and legislative decision-making processes.

**2. Parents are viewed and enabled as activists** (Parent Power, 2014)

We must support the idea of parents as activists. Activism is needed to break a longstanding tradition of what urban schools have come to believe parents, particularly low income, are capable of understanding and entitled to do. Parental support of student achievement is vital, and so is helping these parents understand and promote their personal process of empowerment and efficacy.

In an American democracy, parents have a right and responsibility to actively take authentic, engaged ownership of their own public schools and communities. Bicultural parents as activists become allies with the larger community especially in realizing the conditions in transformation which lead to access, social justice, personal and cultural liberation, and equitable schools for all.

*Here, parents advance school reform to school transformation:* parents challenge schools to be more responsive, inclusive, and equitable. Parents as critical friends/social equals with school staff become co-participants in school decision-making processes. Parents make sure private/corporate agendas do not undermine the purpose of public schools. See Local School Councils (Loflin & Evans, 2012).

This transformative approach creates a "cultural democracy" where parents are problem posing action researchers, agents of transformative change for a more just society--not only in their school(s), but their very neighborhoods.

**3. Students and their families must not have to choose between the culture they bring to school and the school's culture in order to enter the mainstream or institutions of higher learning.**

Since the early 1900s when a mixture of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration produced the need for public education, public schools have been sites of assimilation into the American way of life and its Standard English language.

In the past and currently, some individuals and groups resisted education as assimilation, especially if it means losing or the disregard of the culture they bring to school. This is especially the case for urban youth of all colors, and disconnection between urban schooling and their global hip hop youth culture (Loflin & Evans, 2015).

"I failed your class 'cause I ain't with your reasoning. You tryin' to make me you."

~ Boogie Down Productions, 1989

A review of educator Prudence Carter's work in her book *Keepin It Real* (2006) looks at this issue like this, "What is unequivocally helpful from Prudence Carter's inquiry is the assertion that these young people's way of being and the concepts of achievement and mobility need not be mutually exclusive.

That is, as a society perhaps we need to meet these students where they are culturally so they can participate in the opportunity structure without having to compromise their sense of self” (j.p.h., 2007).

Prudence Carter also revisits an old issue (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998) around the concern that some African American students resist doing well academically in school because they will be accused of “acting white.” She suggests: what some urban students resist/reject is not “acting white,” but the assumption that to succeed in school one must assimilate into mainstream society to the exclusion of one's own culture. Doing well in school becomes a “subtractive process” and the identity of Black students is challenged and can be compromised. To clarify, she introduces this point: it's not that these students have to act white to be successful, they can't act Black and be successful.

Finally, teachers Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) make this point: “Urban students are asked to trade the culture of their home and community for the ‘higher culture’ of the school in exchange for access to college. This reduces the life choices of students into a false binary, that of choosing between staying behind as a failure, and “getting out” as a success. Faced with the prospect of leaving their communities behind to be successful, many urban youth opt out of school. They choose to retain an urban and cultural identity they perceive to be in conflict with the expectations of schools, even if the cost of that choice is school failure. *To be effective, urban schools must begin to develop partnerships with communities that provide young people the opportunity to be successful while maintaining their identities as urban youth.*” [emphasis mine]

To foster the appreciation of urban students, schools must validate and affirm the identity of American urban youth and the global youth culture they brought about. See a review of the “Pedagogy of Recognition” concept by Loflin & Evans (2015).

#### **4. Make the purpose of urban schools easing and eradicating poverty and the other social toxins which interfere with the success of students and teachers.**

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) argue that previous plans to make urban schools work for urban students have missed the mark. Academic failure in urban schools persists despite increasing attention to the problem from a variety of sources including NCLB.

“Their environment does not allow them to be successful. Students have a lot of psychological issues and social problems, baggage that interferes with their academic success.”

~ Jethroe Knazze, Principal IPS Arlington High School, 2010

According to these educators, the failure of these efforts can be traced to the fact resources have not been used to directly address the context of urban life and the poverty that shape the lives of students and the surrounding community. *Here, the purpose of urban schools is not to get students out of poverty, but to get rid of poverty* (Loflin, 2011a).

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell suggest community-wide efforts are needed to:

- help schools, and teachers most directly, in the development and implementation of pedagogy and curricula which
  - address the social and economic conditions of urban life, and
  - develop a sense of power among students for altering those conditions.

The Black and Latino Policy Institute (B&LPI) maintains that to be successful, educational reforms in the urban schools have to be part of a larger effort to address the problems of poverty and other social toxins (Ginwright, 2010) in urban communities. *We must ultimately, therefore, eliminate poverty; we must eliminate the underperforming urban school by eliminating the underlying structural causes of this unacceptable performance* (Loflin, 2011b).

The B&LPI therefore calls for a more comprehensive vision of school reform, in fact a transformation (Loflin, 2011b). This broader and deeper vision recognizes the need to move beyond *attempts to*

*change only the system of education inside the school in order to also address more fundamental problems in our community itself--an environment which actually enables failing\* schools.*

“Among the lowest-performing schools, two-thirds also had the poorest students in the state. Poverty is insidious; it transcends almost all aspects of living. If we decided to do nothing but attend to poverty, we’d see a high graduation rate.” ~ Professor Tracy Cross, Ball State University

An anti-poverty curriculum is a win-win situation: urban students acquire the academic and higher order thinking skills needed for career, college, and critical citizenship, all while having empowering experiences solving relevant real-world problems as they eradicate the circumstances of poverty and nurture the self-determination and sustainability of their family and neighborhood.

“There is solid agreement on the basic proposition that conventional education is totally inadequate to address the special problems of the urban poor. Something quite different is needed, something that deals not only with reading, writing, and arithmetic, but with the environment that shapes these students' lives and determines their educational needs.”

~ Chief Justice Weientz, New Jersey Supreme Court, Abbott v. Burke decision in 1990

\*Today, test scores harmfully narrow what it means to be a successful urban school.

Social toxins are major factors of school success--interpersonal: violence, fear, shame, uncertainty, nihilism, and loss of control; and, structural: poverty, family dislocation, health care, racism and social isolation, nutrition, and exodus of jobs from urban to suburbs (Ginwright, 2010).

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