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Focus: Culture of Possibility

Arkansan Parents “Pushing Beyond the Breaks”

by Bradley Scott, Ph.D.

Almost 400 African American and Latino parents and community members gathered in Little Rock at the Second Annual Summit for Parents. This unique event, “Pushing Beyond the Breaks,” brought together African American and Latino families to explore together many issues, barriers and conditions in public education that lead to persistently poor outcomes for their children. Hosted by the Little Rock Parent Education Project, the summit was sponsored by the Arkansas Cradle to Prison Pipeline Initiative with support from the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity.

The conference was held bilingually in English and Spanish, with the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity also providing concurrent sessions entirely in Spanish for those families for whom that language was the primary or sole language.

The “breaks” focused on during the conference are those low outcomes that repeatedly show up for African American and Latino students juxtaposed with the highly successful outcomes that are experienced to a significant degree by non-Latino and non-African American students in the schools of the Little Rock metropolitan area. The summit provided dynamic sessions focused on these breaks and ways parents can respond as advocates for their children.

The breaks include other people’s beliefs about

minority children, such as the beliefs that these children cannot learn, don’t want to learn, or somehow are too pitiful to learn; that certain children do not have dreams and aspirations for a better life; that Black boys and Brown boys deserve to be pushed out of schools and into juvenile justice systems and prisons; that young minority girls only aspire to be pregnant and become young teen mothers; that Black parents and Brown parents do not care about their children and are not interested in being involved in their school’s success; that minority children will drop out of school, will not go to college, will not graduate from college and will not be successful in life; and that some children do not deserve to reap benefits of good schooling and education.

There are other breaks stemming from prejudice by race, class and language that say the children of these parents cannot do better, be better, and get better in academic and other outcomes with the right supports. These breaks arise from the habit some have of writing off certain types of children because they do not see in them the magnificence of who they are and to whom they are and have been connected.

There also are institutional “breaks,” such as suspension and expulsion processes; high school dropout rates; inappropriate responses to teen pregnancy; the inadequate juvenile justice system and processes; prison; no or low college going
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“Schools are not poor because the children in them are poor or black or brown. Schools are poor because we have poor policies, poor practices and inadequate investments.”

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

(Arkansan Parents "Pushing Beyond the Breaks," continued from Page 1)

rates; course failures, lack of access to college prep courses, higher-level courses, dual credit courses; profiling; violence, brutality and killing of our boys and men of color; and disenfranchisement, political powerlessness, and economic hegemony and poverty.

Even in the midst of these breaks, we must develop a new way of seeing what is possible. I was pleased to provide the opening keynote for the summit. A portion of my remarks follows.

"There is a brave new world of which your children should be a part. This brave new world is made up of all kinds of people. They are people from all over the world. Your children will compete with them for 21st century jobs, salaries, good lives, and other opportunities for success.

"Your schools in Arkansas, in Pulaski County, and in the Little Rock metropolitan area need a new narrative for this brave new world. We cannot continue the narratives of the 20th century. This narrative is not just about educational excellence for Black learners and White learners. It is about preparation for life success for all learners regardless of their race, color, language, economic status, gender, and/or any other characteristic that makes learners different.

"They all deserve and have a right to a quality education taught by highly qualified, effective teachers, administrators and leaders in great schools no matter where these learners live and no matter to whom they are connected."

Participants discussed their advocacy for their children and ways in which they could fight the prison pipeline that exists in Arkansas for boys of color. They discussed how to ask the right questions regarding activities that impact their chil-

dren in schools, how to advocate and even protest persistent mistreatment or discriminatory practices that deny benefit to their sons and daughters, and how to use their own voices and power of engagement to change systems, structures and practices that fail to assure equitable opportunity, treatment and benefit to their children in public schools.

Finally, parents at the summit committed to take action to push back and break down the barriers to their children's success. The Little Rock Parent Project, the Arkansas Cradle to Prison Pipeline Initiative, the Regional Children Defense Fund, and the City of Little Rock Community Programs have committed resources to support parents acting to push beyond the breaks and make a difference for their children in the public schools of the Little Rock metropolitan area.

In fact, the City of Little Rock Community Programs is making available grants of \$75,000 each to organizations, community groups, and other civic entities that are committed to supporting parents as they take action to improve education for their children. Three of these \$75,000 grants have specifically been set aside for organizations supporting Latino families to take action. Having this kind and level of recognition is entirely unique in the Little Rock historical context and speaks to the changing demographics in the local and statewide Arkansan landscape.

The IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity has made a commitment to the state department of education, targeted public schools across to the state, and community organizations that have expressed an interest to engage African American and Latino families in determined action in their children's schools to break through the persistent barriers to equity and excellence

for their children. This year of focus in the state had a wonderful and exciting start during the Second Annual Parent Conference. Future reports of activities that will be underway will be reported in subsequent updates.



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IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity

For more information about the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or contact@idra.org.

Additional resources are available online at www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity funded by the U.S. Department of Education

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Advancing the Culture of Promise and Possibility

by Nilka Avilés, Ed.D., and Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D.

The *culture of poverty* theory postulates that those who are poor gain a poverty-perpetuating value system. It is prevalent in the mindsets of many educators and has thereby often contributed to schools' dysfunctional behaviors and practices that undermine the academic success of many students, particularly poor and minority students. Tensions exist in the minds of many educators who know about the myths associated with a culture of poverty and, without realizing, yield to well-ingrained prejudices that are used subconsciously to justify any shortcomings in working with some students.

Recently, a group of educators was attending a workshop on how to be successful with every student. When asked about their philosophy of education, all agreed with the axiom that all students can learn and that the teacher can play a positive role in ensuring that all students are successful. Good intentions appear to be less evident, however, when asked about the barriers that students face. The majority started by listing assumptions and forces outside the school, such as "parents don't care" or "students are not motivated to learn."

Many of us don't realize we have subconscious biases or make personal judgments that affect what we are communicating and how we are interacting with people who are not like us. As educators, we need to acknowledge and have a clear understanding of how the interaction between our beliefs, attitudes and behaviors filters into what happens in the classroom. If we are aware of our hidden biases, we can monitor and adjust our thought processes before they are expressed through dysfunctional actions and behaviors.

Thus, we challenge each educator to subscribe to a *culture of promise*. As difficult as it may appear, we must move from using a poverty lens to a possibility lens. We need to uphold the understanding that educators and all stakeholders will make a real difference in the lives of all students,

including the ones who continuously face many life challenges and adversities.

Nurturing, caring, being empathetic and compassionate and sustaining a positive attitude accompanied by giving hope, increases the opportunities of all students to be more in tune with learning, being equipped to reach standards of excellence regardless of the color of their skin, ethnicity, language they speak or socioeconomic status.

As educators, we must debunk Ruby Payne's oppressive framework of poverty that results in supporting the status quo allowing injustices to blatantly go unopposed (Gorski, 2005). Earnestly, we need to join efforts to eliminate what oppresses students in our schools and address inequities that exist by empowering and advancing the culture of promise and possibility.

The research literature reveals that education is seen as a great equalizer. But many dysfunctional, pervasive practices based on the myths of a culture of poverty perpetuate inequalities in the school system.

Gorski (2013) lists myths that are responsible for the most pervasive practices. These myths include: poor people are unmotivated and have a weak work ethic; poor parents are uninvolved in their children's learning, largely because they do not value education; poor people are linguistically deficient; and poor people tend to abuse drugs and alcohol.

What we need to realize is that educational systems often deny many students access to equitable resources in intellectual enrichment, validating assets, support services, affirming surroundings, high expectations, rigorous curriculum and pedagogies, high quality teaching, and high quality resources, including technology, to which all students are entitled.

Systems also perpetuate classism by falling into
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A positive and constructive emotional state of mind for a student is critical to learning. Remember, students excel with teachers who like, who respect and who value them.

(Advancing the Culture of Promise and Possibility, continued from Page 3)

the deficit theory construct, which focuses on established stereotypes and ignores the inequitable access to a quality education that continuously supports the cycle of poverty (Gorski, 2013; Kozol, 1992).

On the other hand, we know that many teachers and school leaders who do not make excuses for poor performance of schools and their students, regardless of socioeconomic status, lead with an asset-based lens that focuses on strengths, converting identified weaknesses into powerful competencies.

As Jensen (2013) indicates, the classroom teacher is, by far, the most significant contributor as he or she interacts with students on a daily basis for several hours a day. This interaction can be positive by engaging the student in a learner-centered classroom free of stereotypes and teacher biases, or it can be a negative experience that disengages students in a more hostile environment that leads to poor performance.

How do we help educators deal with the ingrained biases that may be hindering students' academic performance? If we as educators want students to excel in learning, we in turn must be willing to excel in our job ensuring that all students do well. It's about changing the way we think and act; it's about being more aware of our own attitudes, hidden rules and beliefs systems as we interact with our students.

This requires that we work with students in new and different ways. We need to adapt our teaching so that we interact with students to reach them in more insightful and meaningful ways. We cannot assume that what worked for us or what worked with others in the past is going to work now. And it didn't necessarily really work back then either.

Jensen (2013) discusses powerful engagement strategies that uplift the mindset of possibility and promise, that raise achievement and increase access in an effort to eradicate opportunity gaps as we strive to change systems to empower the people who govern them.

These powerful strategies include: (1) explore the seven factors that correlate with engagement, (2) learn the rules for engagement, (3) engage for positive climate, (4) engage to build cognitive capacity, (5) engage to support motivation and effort, (6) engage for deep understanding, (7) engage for energy and focus and learn how to automate engagement.

Students require you to believe in them so that they can prosper and reach their fullest potential. Build their confidence as you interact with them, use meaningful affirmations, and show them that you care about them.

Educators can promote a classroom environment in which students are affirmed and where possibilities and promise are central to what happens inside the classroom. A positive and constructive, emotional state of mind for a student is critical to learning. Remember, students excel with teachers who like, who respect and who value them. Plan your lessons with a purpose of promise and possibility, show your passion and ensure students know what you want them to accomplish each day.

When you instill hope and arm students with the capacity to unleash their potential, you make a difference in their life becoming their champion, and that will be treasured forever.

Resources

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Embracing the Culture of Possibility for Student Success

Culture-of-Poverty Thinking Shortchanges Students and Families

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

People who are poor have assets, gifts and strengths that far outweigh the stereotypical negative traits ascribed to them. Approaching children and adults with an attitude of respect runs counter to the prejudices evident in the national rhetoric that is now experiencing a new vogue.

Culture of Poverty Myths and the Assets of the Poor

In “The Myth of the ‘Culture of Poverty,’” Paul Gorski identifies and rebuts some misconceptions of poor people (2008). Building on Gorski’s work, I contrast each myth with an asset-based truth below.

- **Myth:** Poor people are unmotivated and have a weak work ethic.
- **Asset:** Poor people survive and subsist under trying circumstances, often taking difficult and severely underpaid jobs.
- **Myth:** Poor parents are uninvolved in their children’s learning, largely because they do not value education.
- **Asset:** Families see education as critical to success in life and counsel their children to get educated so that they don’t suffer the same poverty as their parents.
- **Myth:** Poor people are linguistically deficient.
- **Asset:** Families talk in many registers and with their own unique vocabularies.

Survival and Subsistence

The rule, rather than the exception, has been that families keep working to feed and clothe their children. For example, the majority of the families in the communities where IDRA is supporting Comunitario PTAs are squarely within the official guidelines designating them as poor. In spite of the challenges related to their severe economic disadvantage, we see them attend monthly meetings with a perseverance that would make any suburban PTA proud.

One Comunitario PTA officer, for example, with five children spread across elementary, middle and high school levels, continues to fulfill her organizational responsibilities while faced with the crisis of providing food on the table as her husband recovers from appendicitis and attempts to return to his day labor and garden work. This example is not exceptional within these communities.

Education is Critical

A recurring memory from my childhood in a Laredo, Texas, barrio in the 1950s is a phrase indelibly recorded, “*Edúcate para que no sufras lo que sufrí yo* [Educate yourself so that you don’t suffer what I have gone through].”

As my mother repeated regularly, regardless of income and ethnic background, families value education. One constant in IDRA’s work with families all over Texas and in many other parts of this country and beyond that to England and Brazil, has been a family’s desire that their children have access to an excellent education. IDRA’s Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program is a strong, recognized example.

In September 2014, IDRA held a conference for all the Comunitario PTAs in the Texas Lower Rio Grande Valley. When asked who among them wanted their children to complete college, every single one of the 90 participants raised their hands. Without any doubt, question, or hesitation, they each proclaimed, “My child is college material.”

Language and Communication

IDRA’s Family Leadership in Education Model is based on the fundamental loquacity of our families: poor, of color and recent immigrant. The conversations might be in Spanish, but the content is about the educational dreams they have for their children. The communication within most homes is energetic, vibrant and humorous. Reticence in a public meeting gives little indication.

(cont. on Page 6)

The culture of possibility is a lens that enables us to see and focus on the assets that result in academic success for our children and the social and economic stability our families deserve.

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tion of how communicative a mother is at home.

Within Comunitario PTA meetings, small group discussions are equally as spirited, humorous and not easy to stop when time is running out. When a shy participant is asked to report out the discussion at her table, she is being invited to emerge as a leader. A successful grassroots organization, the same as a successful classroom teacher in these neighborhoods, is attuned to the language and the rich linguistic context in these homes and neighborhoods.

Culture of Possibility

Community developers who have operated from an asset perspective have research and practice that supports their work. Kretzmann & McKnight, in the early 1990s, provided asset-mapping training for helping communities help themselves based on their early experiences in urban ghettos (Asset-Based Community Development Institute, 2009).

Similarly, Luis Moll and other educators began looking at the talents that bilingual students brought to school from their homes (Gonzalez, et al., nd).

In doing so, Moll uncovered and documented previously unacknowledged family resources.

As a classroom teacher in the mid-1960s, I had my junior English class students conduct research in their own communities. One class did an amazing job comparing food prices in neighborhood mom-and-pop stores that gave credit to the prices in large grocery stores on the other side of town. Many of those students were seasonal sheep-shearing families who annually migrated to west Texas and returned to San Felipe in Del Rio to continue their education. They demonstrated in no uncertain terms that my students who were from poor, Spanish-speaking families had, in fact, an array of experiences, talents and resources that any language arts teacher worth his Shakespeare could tap and rejoice in.

IDRA's culture of possibility vision is not a pie-in-the-sky ideal. To have success with any community, any school or any classroom, transformation is much more strategic, effective and practical to operate from a position of valuing the worth of the

student, the parent and the teacher. The culture of possibility is a lens that enables us to see and focus on the assets that result in academic success for our children and the social and economic stability our families deserve.

Resources

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Meet Dr. Bradley Scott

Director of IDRA's Educational Transformation & Innovation Department

This year, the *IDRA Newsletter* is highlighting our staff's varied and diverse talents and backgrounds. Dr. Bradley Scott directs the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity, a federally-funded equity assistance center, and leads IDRA's Department of Educational Transformation and Innovation. The department conducts professional development, including coaching and mentoring for teachers, teacher leaders, principals leaders, and administrative leadership in school districts.

While it is known by many that Dr. Scott is a singer, it may not be known that as a choir director, he was named the Best Choir Director of the Year, three years running. He is an actor and has been a part of community theater. He received the best Supporting Actor of the Year while he taught in New York and was a member of the Community Theater Group of Elmira New York.

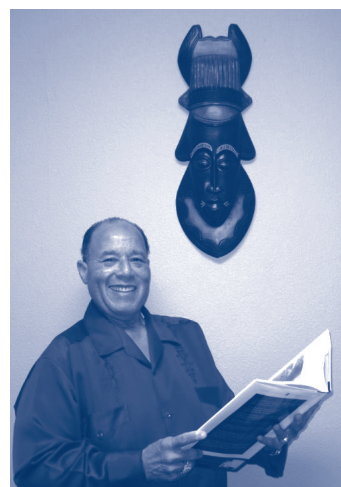
He has served as chair of many organizational boards and is most proud of the Friends of the Graduating Seniors Scholarship Fund that has given out over a half million dollars to the sons and daughter of military members in San Antonio.

Dr. Scott's life is rooted in many varied activities and interests for which he is both recognized and awarded. Dr. Scott was awarded a Life Time Achievement Award from the Legislature of the State of Pennsylvania and was designated a Living Legend not only for the service he has pro-

vided to Clairton, Penn., where he grew up, but also to the entire state, as an exemplar of service in action.

He is a man of service in his local community and the nation. Locally, he is the recipient of the Difference Maker Award for community service. He has received special service awards from the Tulsa Public Schools, Oklahoma and East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana.

He has been recognized twice by former Governor Beebe as an Arkansas Traveler for his service to the public school systems of Arkansas. He received the leadership recognition for service to the state of Texas and the Edwards Ministerial Alliance awarded him both the leadership award for service to public education in Texas and a Life Time achievement award for his community service. He has been recognized by Omicron Delta Kappa as Man of the Year for his leadership in public life and the Top Ladies of Distinction honored him with the president's Humanitarian of the Year Award.



Low Funding for Educating ELLs Affects Students Across Texas

New Research on Education of English Learners in Middle School & High School Released at IDRA José A. Cárdenas School Finance Fellow Program Symposium

English language learners make up the fastest growing segment of the student population but they are one of the lowest academically performing groups of students, and the achievement gap widens as students progress through school. Dr. Oscar Jimenez-Castellanos, IDRA's inaugural José A. Cárdenas School Finance Fellow, presented his research findings on securing educational equity and excellence for English language learners in Texas secondary schools at a symposium in February.

"English language learners are almost one out of five students in the state of Texas and are not being well served by schools in Texas. They continue to be placed in underfunded, poorly monitored, segregated programs that do not produce results, particularly in middle school and high school," stated Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President.

"We are taking a look at what needs to be done to assure they are prepared for college. Right now, for example, only one out of 10 English language learners is prepared to go to college. That's outrageous," added Dr. Robledo Montecel.

Dr. Jimenez-Castellanos, Associate Professor at Arizona State University, began: "Before conducting the study, I had a perception that Texas was at the leading edge of educating English language learners. I was expecting to find real solutions to national issues related to secondary English language learners. But I learned that Texas is not the utopia I had envisioned."

In person and via livecast, the event gathered more than 80 education and community leaders, and experts in law and education research around the critical question of how we can improve secondary education quality and access for ELLs. A panel of experts reflected on key themes and questions raised by the research and participants explored important implications of the research for education quality and equity for English learners in policy and practice.



Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President introduces student guest and future bilingual teacher, Raquel Mijares, who presented closing remarks at the symposium. Miss. Mijares is President of the Bilingual Education Student Organization (BESO) at Our Lady of the Lake University.

Important points from the research, the event and our work in this area:

- This study found no secondary schools in Texas that are consistently exceeding academic benchmarks with ELLs. The schools with highest ELL achievement expend significantly more general funds than other schools.
- Texas is significantly underfunding ELL education (with supplemental funding of only 10 percent despite research indicating much higher weights are needed).
- Though increasing ELL weighted funding is important, the funding weight alone is not sufficient without also increasing funding for the base program for all students.
- Reporting on the status of ELL education in Texas schools has not been providing a clear picture since much of the data lumps elementary and secondary grade level data.
- The majority of ELL students are U.S. born.
- While Texas only mandates schools to provide ELL programs if they have at least 20 ELL students in a grade level, federal policy requires schools to serve every ELL student – as was reiterated recently by the U.S. Department of Education and U.S.

Department of Justice.

News coverage generated from the event include:

- "Extra help in schools where needed," an editorial by the San Antonio Express-News ("It is as if the state really doesn't want them to succeed in school and then in life.")
- "More money for bilingual education urged," by Francisco Vara-Orta of the San Antonio Express-News
- "Finding the Keys to School Funding in your Pocket," by Julian Vasquez Heilig (one of the symposium panelists) on his Cloaking Inequity blog
- "Lessons from Texas on the Relationship Between School Funding and the Academic Achievement of English Language Learners," by Amaya Garcia of the Education Policy program at New America

The event's archival video is available for viewing online along with photos and links to media coverage and U.S. Department of Education guidance at <http://budurl.com/IDRASym15>.

This symposium was convened by IDRA and hosted with the Center for Mexican American Studies and Research, Our Lady of the Lake University. The following day, IDRA briefed legislative staff in Austin on the research and implications for policy in a forum hosted by Senator José Rodríguez and held in collaboration with the Texas Center for Education Policy, University of Texas at Austin. Sen. Rodríguez stated, "What we heard from the research is confirmation that Texas is not doing right by our English language learners... Texas needs to do better at investing in education."

IDRA established the José A. Cárdenas School Finance Fellows Program in 2013 to honor the memory of IDRA founder, Dr. José Angel Cárdenas. The goal of the program is engage the nation's most promising researchers in investigating school finance solutions that secure equity and excellence for all public school students.



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