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## **TOWARD A LANGUAGE OF ACTION: BEYOND CRITIQUE AND POSSIBILITY**

In a recent fit of optimism, two of us (Gabbard & L'Esperance) recently published an open letter to former North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt (2002) in *The Educational Forum*. Written as an invitation to dialogue, this open letter acknowledged many of the accomplishments that Hunt lists among his credits as one of the nation's top "education governors" in his 2002 book *First in America* (2001). In particular, we congratulated him on his "efforts to create and promote rigorous standards that would increase the level of professional competency among teachers" (p. 304). Those efforts included providing monetary incentives to teachers who pursue certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). North Carolina now leads the nation in the number of nationally Board Certified teachers. Hunt's administration also passed legislation requiring all initially licensed teachers (ILTs) to complete a performance-based program of professional development in order to receive their permanent teaching licenses. Through the completion of the Performance-Based Licensure portfolio over a three year period, these new teachers would develop the habits of "reflective practitioners" as they sought to cultivate their competence in the "Core Standards" created by the Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC). Additionally, the Hunt administration facilitated a substantive revision of the state's Standard Course of Study (SCS) to bring that required curriculum and its supporting principles of instruction into alignment with NBPTS and INTASC standards. Finally, Hunt's office also required the state's graduate and undergraduate programs of teacher education to align their curricula with those same standards. In our view, these measures represented significant steps in the right direction to effect meaningful educational reform in North Carolina's public schools.

Unfortunately, as we pointed out, the professional culture in the majority of North Carolina's schools do not support teachers' efforts to ground their daily practices in the professional teaching standards developed by NBPTS and INTASC. The prevailing cultures in most schools also inhibit teachers in this state from aligning their classroom practices with the underlying principles of the state's own curriculum (SCS). Therefore, we lamented the fact that the most meritorious of Hunt's achievements as an "education governor" have not succeeded in reaching the classroom. On paper, it would appear that North Carolina's teachers rank among the nation's most devoted practitioners of the NBPTS and INTASC standards. In practice, however, any such devotion has been undermined by the state's program of high-stakes testing and accountability.

In addressing our concerns to Hunt on these matters and how the incongruencies between the rhetoric and the reality of educational reform fuel the teacher attrition rate and, hence, the state's incessant teacher shortage, we did not seek to discount or discredit his record as an "education governor." Instead, in

framing our thoughts as an open letter, we sought to draw him into a dialogue and working relationship with us on how we, in concert with his newly created First in America Foundation, could work together to eliminate these incongruities. We genuinely sought a response from the former governor that would lead us, as well as other teacher educators who understand what sort of practices are *really* taking place inside the state's classrooms, to work with him in developing strategies for cultivating professional cultures within North Carolina schools that would truly support teachers' abilities to align their daily practices with the NBPTS and INTASC standards, as well as the SCS.

As we originally wrote to Hunt, achieving his "audacious goal" of making North Carolina schools "First in America" requires us to "assess honestly how far we have come as the result of the reforms initiated under [his] watch" (Gabbard & L'Esperance, 2002). It also stands to reason that we can assess our hopes for future progress in terms of what has happened to those reforms since he left his watch as governor. Just before the conclusion of our open letter, we posed the following question to Hunt:

If it is worth the trouble to develop [professional teaching] standards, and if we pronounce those standards to the public as evidence of our commitment to improve the quality of our schools, then aren't those standards worth enforcing? (p. 3)

Though Hunt has yet to respond to our open letter, just one month after it appeared in *The Educational Forum*, the North Carolina General Assembly sent a loud and clear response to this question. The House and the Senate of the state's General Assembly had recently passed budgetary legislation that eliminated the Performance-Based Licensure (PBL) program. Then, just two days prior to the deadline that we had established for completing this paper, our local newspaper here in Greenville (*The Daily Reflector*) published an article with the headline "Teacher portfolios get reprieve in the state's final spending plan." Not only did the General Assembly eliminate this program that could have provided a means for ensuring that the professional cultures of schools supported a model of teaching and continuous professional development grounded in research-based, national teaching standards and the underlying principles of the state's own curriculum, it also reduced the budget of the state's teacher mentoring program by \$3,134,984.

When theorizing our open letter to Hunt, we operated under the naïve assumptions that 1) he was unaware of the sorts of teaching that are really going on inside of North Carolina schools, and 2) once we brought these issues to his attention that he would be interested in working with us to resolve the disparity between rhetoric and reality. Though we used the language of the state to persuade Hunt, as an agent of state power, to enter into dialogue with us on these issues, we neglected to heed Noam Chomsky's cautionary warning against naïve efforts such as ours to "speak truth to power." "For much of my life," Chomsky writes,

I've been closely involved with pacifist groups in direct action and resistance, and educational and organizing projects. We've spent days in jail together, and it is a freakish accident that they did not extend to many years, as we realistically expected 30 years ago. That creates bonds of loyalty and friendship, but also brings out some disagreements. So, my Quaker friends and colleagues in disrupting illegitimate authority adopt the slogan: 'Speak truth to power.' I strongly disagree. The audience is entirely wrong, and the effort hardly more than a form of self-indulgence. It is a waste of time to speak truth to Henry Kissinger, or to the CEO of General Motors, or others who exercise power in coercive institutions--truths that they already know well enough, for the most part" (Chomsky, 1996, p. 61).

In helping ourselves recover from our naiveté, we want to frame this paper, at least initially, within the context of Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux's (1997) discussion of "Critical Pedagogy and the Crisis within the Language of Theory" in order to respond to and, more significantly, extend their line of

argumentation. In brief, McLaren and Giroux lament what they perceive to be a failure on the part of critical educational theorists, pointing out that the strength of that community of theorists – the critique of public schools "as a powerful instrument for the reproduction of capitalist social relations and the dominant legitimating ideologies of dominant groups" (p. 18) – has also been their weakness. Through their emphasis on developing a satisfactorily explanatory language of critique, critical educational theorists have been so caught up in "describing the reality of existing schools that they have failed to take up the question of what it is that schools should be" (p. 19). Moreover, they write, critical educational theorists have ignored the important task of theorizing for schools, of developing a language of possibility in which to formulate a substantive vision that can serve as "the foundation of a progressive public philosophy as a referent for reconstructing schools as democratic public spheres" (p. 19).

We agree with McLaren and Giroux's recognition of the need for such a vision and an accompanying language for articulating it; in fact, implicit in critique are the criteria against which existing social systems are judged. That is to say, the language of possibility is always latent within the language of critique, but, to be truly useful, it must be drawn out and made visible. Thus, as McLaren and Giroux rightly remind us, a range of possibilities for truly democratic public spheres needs to be explicitly advanced and contested. We argue, however, that if the point of critical theory is, as Horkheimer and Freire say, understanding the world so as to change it, critical educational theorists must move beyond the outlining of possibilities into the realm of reflective action, into praxis.

We believe a necessary language of action entails reflecting with teachers about what they do and about whatever forces currently impact the conditions under which they work (critique). It also entails reflecting with teachers about what they want to create through their actual practice (possibility). There may be—and judging from our discussions with teachers there are—instances in which teachers believe that crucial factors impacting the conditions of their labor inhibit alignment of their practice with their vision. As described below, conspicuous among these factors is the presence of high-stakes testing and the accountability systems through which such testing registers its effects on teachers. In such cases, critical educational theorists can and should work alongside teachers in resisting those forces and in transforming the nature and conditions of teachers' work.

### **The Moral Imperative for Action**

Another useful way of framing the relationship between the languages of *critique*, *possibility*, and *action* is found in Noam Chomsky's (1996) discussion of "The Intellectual Responsibility of Writers." Chomsky asserts that it is the moral responsibility of anyone associated with intellectual work "to find out and tell the truth as best one can, about things that matter, to the right audience" (p. 55). Finding out and telling the truth clearly aligns with the language of critique. Chomsky contends that there is a moral dimension involved with determining which things matter. That is, as intellectual workers we should most concern ourselves with those things that have real consequences for real communities (which we would extend to include both human and non-human alike). This is not to deny the importance or value of addressing issues of more purely intellectual interest, but Chomsky's contentions clearly encourage us to conduct intellectual work that holds immediate significance for real living beings. This issue is crucial in making a determination of our audience. In Chomsky's view, "the audience is properly chosen if it should know the truth: for enlightenment, but primarily for action that will be of human significance, that will help relieve suffering and distress" (p. 56). It is also important, as Chomsky quite correctly points out, that we should not view those we engage merely as "an audience, but as a community of common concern in which one hopes to participate constructively. We should not be speaking to, but with" (p. 61). Herein lies the basis for establishing solidarity with those among whom critical educational theorists should seek to work in transforming schools and school cultures, the people who work in actual schools.

In our own work, the language of critique that we deploy focuses on current legislative impositions of accountability systems which equate teacher performance with student performance on high-stakes end-

of-course and end-of-grade testing. This issue can easily be approached from the language of critique (Gabbard, 2000), but we have derived this focus primarily from our conversations with teachers. The negative impact that these accountability systems and high-stakes testing have on their teaching practices and the overall professional cultures of their schools matters to teachers, and the impact matters deeply when it erodes the professional culture within the schools in which the teachers work. Teachers find much to criticize in current reform efforts, but unfortunately, as Chomsky notes, speaking the truth can be personally costly, particularly in systems that lean more toward totalitarianism than democracy. Teachers clearly understand this and, consequently, feel inhibited from speaking out even against accountability structures which have led to a dramatic increase in what Wise (1979) calls "legislated learning," an attempt to teacher-proof curriculum by establishing tight links between instruction and testing. Such an approach contradicts research on effective school reform which, as Kirst notes, shows that real improvement takes place "when those responsible for each school are given more responsibility rather than less" (Sunday Express News, 1984). Darling-Hammond and Wise (1983) maintain that highly standardized prescriptions will lead to dissatisfied professionals, those who would feel, in DeCharms' (1968) terminology, more like "pawns" than "origins."

In private conversation, teachers have no qualms about expressing their dissatisfaction, but they believe that any open dissent would lead to the termination of their employment. One of us (Perreault) interviewed teachers specifically about the felt impact of state testing upon their classroom, as well as the legitimacy of the state's purpose in imposing such a program. Focus groups were selected at two kinds of schools in the same state--those highly successful on mandated tests, and those quite unsuccessful. Each group consisted of seven to nine members; as is typical of the teaching force in American public schools, the majority of the members were white and female. The discussions were taped, transcribed, and analyzed for emergent themes.

The first theme found was that the pressure of the state testing program, whether direct or indirect, was always present. "The first thing they told us this year was when the testing would be done. We were told to put those dates in our plan books and work back from there," said one veteran teacher. Another added that she had thought about changing schools to work at one where a friend had become principal,

but all she could talk about was test scores and how they had to do better this year. I could see that she felt insecure about having a school that would be in the paper as low achieving and everything was going to be built around the tests.

Teachers also reported that, as a direct result of state mandates, their schools had instituted policies about curriculum content. "We were told, 'If it ain't on the test, don't teach it.'" One principal told his teachers not to introduce new material in the six weeks before the test; this time was to be spent on review, especially in formats used in the upcoming exam.

All [the principal] wants to know is how this relates to the objectives. It affects you, it really does. I teach P.E. and we aren't tested, but I see what it has done to the others--there's just really not much enrichment. It's all basics, basic, basics.

Teachers also noted that the operational definition of the "basics" had changed; there was less essay work done, and required writing often took the formats tested on state exams. "I think we're hurting the kids, honestly. I mean our scores are better but I just don't think they have the well-rounded skills they'll need." Other teachers noted the pressure they felt to keep on track with the prescribed curriculum.

Before, you know, I could just go with the kids if something came up which hooked them. But now if we just start off in a different direction, I get worried we won't get back to

what's required, and I have to kind of rein them in. I know they get frustrated, and I sure do. I think, well, is this what I got into teaching for?

Teachers were concerned about the ethics of the extent of time spent on preparing students to do well on the exam. "I mean, coaching is fine, but all the time we spend on it--is that right? All the practice?" Teachers reported instances of students being placed in different special education categories so they would not be required to take state exams. One noted:

The principal, in one of our staff meetings, said something like "Is there some way we could take these 20 kids, the ones who have no chance of passing, and send them on a field trip for the week?" She was just kidding, of course, but I think a lot of us were nodding like it wasn't such a bad idea. That's what it has done to us--made us so focused on our test results that we don't ask any more if it's right or not.

Teachers talked about feeling "defeated," "powerless," and "unsure if they were doing the right things" to help students succeed. The feelings varied in intensity but not in kind between the two environments.

It's like when you knew you were going to be observed--you'd have a careful lesson tucked away. Now it's like you're always being observed and you know there is something they want to see and it like pushes on you all the time and I resent it, I really do.

Teachers also reported steps that principals took to help them cope better with testing requirements. Principals at all the schools attempted to attend to morale issues, but teachers noted that these efforts were primarily internal to the school and that principals were seen as doing little to speak out against problems with the accountability program itself. Principals, as a whole, were seen as part of the control mechanism, rather than as professional mentors or spokespersons for better education.

I mean, he talks a good game about being professional, but I know he's looking over his shoulder all the time. That has to have an impact on your own work. You start seeing yourself differently because you know that's how he will judge you in the end.

Principals at both types of schools were seen as offering instrumental advice, but in different ways. At low-achieving schools, the principals' advice was seen as focusing on approaches that led to "de-skilling" the teachers' work. "It is very much a cookbook kind of approach--do this, do that, get those skills ingrained so kids will score better. It doesn't seem to have much to do with what kids need." At higher-scoring schools, on the other hand, principals tended to reinforce teacher attempts at enrichment and relief from the focus on testing, but only if scores remained high. Implicit at both kinds of sites, teachers thought, was principals' acceptance of the neo-conservative approach:

I can see they're under the scope--they're the most visible ones at the school--but I think they just go along with more than they should. It's like they have really bought into the whole agenda and they expect us to just go along.

When probed for their own views on the purposes of public education, teachers gave two kinds of responses. Most of them reflected the extent to which "economization" has penetrated their consciousness. They gave few statements indicating a belief that education should strengthen individuals to defend themselves from the state or to define and pursue their own non-economic interests (see Freire, 1970; Kozol, 1975). "Isn't that what school is about anyway--to get these kids to fit into society, to get a job so they won't be on welfare or doing crime to support themselves?" Added another, "I tell the kids that they have to do well in school so they'll have better job options in the future." These teachers had no

trouble seeing themselves as agents of the state; their concerns with the mandated testing program had more to do with technical problems in test construction and the dissemination of results, not with the overall legitimacy of the aims of the accountability movement. "We're just starting the process, and it's a big change, so we have to expect a few bugs in the system." The function of the schools most often mentioned was the creation of "productive" citizens.

On the other hand, there was a vocal minority within each group which clearly saw their role as one of resistance, with or without support from the administration.

I used to work at a bad school, and I thought it was my job to provide kind of a refuge for kids, a place where they could be safe and sometimes to just be kids. I feel that creeping in where I am now and, just like at my old school, I have to work around the principal to do what's right. I think she knows what I do, but we don't talk about it. She kind of looks the other way, but I don't think she'd back me if push came to shove.

Teachers at the "successful" schools noted that creating space for "real teaching" usually involved some deception, that they couldn't acknowledge openly their own ideas about high stakes testing and its impact of their professional lives. Occasionally, though, real anger surfaced. One teacher noted that the emphasis on testing had "narrowed the experience path and created a 'whorehouse' effect in the classroom." Another added:

She [the principal] said to me, "We've got to get them ready," and I said, "Ready for what? For some test? So they can be part of the machine?" I mean, these are the people I fought against in the 60s and now they are running the schools? They're telling me how to teach, what to teach? They never give up. It's like *The Night of the Living Dead*.<sup>2.14</sup> Though several teachers mentioned the influence of the state legislature in the accountability movement in a general way, this last teacher was the only one of those interviewed who placed the conflict explicitly in a larger political context. Most limited their attention to the felt impact of testing on their own classrooms and addressed the issue as one of professional autonomy. "I don't think it's hostile," said one; "it's just mindless and you have to work around it."

These conversations with teachers indicated that the battle to control the ideology of school reform is being dominated by forces that lead to standardization of curriculum and instruction and to holding teachers accountable for students' mastery of basic skills. From the teachers' perspective this has negatively affected their sense of professionalism by decreasing autonomy and reducing options for children, but they do not see ways in which they can fight the trends. If it is important to foster more humanistic and spiritual aims for public education, it will be crucial to develop pockets of resistance within the system itself. This will be difficult and sometimes even dangerous work since, as Cohen (1971, p. 41) noted, "To expect that a state will allow its schools to serve aims other than those of the national policy is to expect that a state will not act like a state."

Because teachers are very sensitive to the expectations held for them by their immediate supervisors, key to the success of any resistance will be the actions of school principals. If we were to employ only the language of critique, we might note that this suggests that both in their university training programs, and in later field support efforts, principals should be encouraged to examine state requirements within a broad context that includes deep and sustained reflection on the purposes of public education. We might also note how a failure to support principals in this endeavor will force teachers back into the solitary craftsman model that has hindered meaningful reform in countless schools across the nation.

On the other hand, it seems to us that a language of action must address the issue of transforming the entirety of a school's culture, not allowing ourselves to rest comfortably with a mere understanding of the pathologies that detract from teachers' abilities to work collectively with parents, students, and administrative staff in pursuing grander visions of what their school might become. In this regard, it is crucial that we consider the distinction that Chomsky (1996) makes between visions and goals. Visions, he says, refer to "the conception of a future society that animates what we actually do, a society in which a decent human being might want to live" (p. 70). In applying this definition to schools, we could state that an educational vision relates to a conception of a future educational environment that animates what teachers, students, and principals do, an educational environment in which a decent human being might want to teach or learn. Furthermore, Chomsky says that goals refer to "the choices and tasks that are within reach, that we will pursue one way or another guided by a vision that may be distant and hazy" (p. 70). In other words, teachers may not be able to completely align their practices with their visions overnight. This returns us to Chomsky's moral imperative that intellectuals must prioritize their work around those issues of greatest and most immediate concern for those with whom they speak and work. In this case, the issue of greatest and most immediate concern for the teachers interviewed by Perreault is the matter of accountability systems and the high-stakes testing upon which they are based. Our most immediate goal, then, becomes the elimination of these illegitimate systems of coercion.

While teachers may fear speaking out against those accountability systems, those of us who work in the privileged space of academia enjoy considerably more freedom to bring such matters under public scrutiny. At present, Chomsky describes his own short-term goals as efforts toward defending and even strengthening "elements of state authority which, though illegitimate in fundamental ways, are critically necessary right now to impede the dedicated efforts to 'roll back' the progress that has been achieved in extending democracy and human rights" (p. 73). This is a crucial point in understanding a language of action.

Using the language of critique, we might view state-mandated compulsory schooling as fundamentally illegitimate in the sense that the state should not be trusted to play a role in shaping the beliefs, values, and behaviors of its citizens. This distrust, of course, refers us back to what McLaren and Giroux earlier described as the success of critical educational theory – developing a description of how schools reproduce capitalist social relations and the dominant ideologies of ruling groups. However, we must also recognize that public schools have become one of the two most important sources from which individuals receive information about the world in which they live. The other institution is the mainstream media, elements within multinational conglomerate corporations that are owned and operated by private wealth. Because they are private institutions, the public has no clear means by which to shape the purposes and interests that the media serve.

Our schools, conversely, are public, which means that we have mechanisms by which to shape them in directions that extend the scope of our democracy and address fundamental human rights. For example, activists within the Civil Rights Movement were able to exert enough pressure on state institutions to bring about some significant degree of desegregation. Other populist groups, particularly since the 1960s, have led educators to begin questioning the content and purposes of school curricula. The multicultural education movement, as a case in point, grew out of people's concerns for how schools treated issues related to the experiences of minority groups and women. The relative success of these popular movements testifies to the extent to which ours is a free and open society. Private wealth and power, of course, perceive this freedom and openness as a threat to their interests and, therefore, use their influence over the state apparatus to keep popular forces at bay (sometimes more successfully than others). In fact, as Gabbard (1999) has described in previous works, the educational "crisis" that led state governments to establish the accountability systems which we are criticizing here provides us with a perfect example of how the media have operated in concert with private wealth and power to "roll back" these populist-based movements within education. In turn, the accountability systems that so distress teachers today can be viewed as techniques for labor management that prevent, or at least inhibit, teachers from engaging in

forms of pedagogy that focus students' attention on issues and information other than the forms of knowledge measured by standardized tests. Foucault (1988) would describe this kind of teacher behavior as a policing function ultimately aimed at increasing the economic wealth of the state.

It is within this context that we define our own short-term goals, insofar as those goals relate to strengthening schools as state institutions. Strengthening them, in this case, means protecting them from the undue influence of private wealth and power, striving toward the empowerment of teachers, principals, and parents to create school cultures in which real communities of people can participate in deciding what purposes schools should serve and how those purposes can best be pursued. Again, teachers may not feel comfortable doing so, but those of us involved in the education of teachers and other school professionals can and must speak out. As Chomsky notes,

the moral culpability of those who ignore the crimes that matter is greater to the extent that the society is free and open, so that they can speak more freely, and act more effectively to bring those crimes to an end. And it is far greater for those who have a measure of privilege within the more free and open societies, those who have the resources, the training, the facilities and opportunities to speak and act effectively: intellectuals, in short. (1996, p. 65)

At the same time as we agree with Chomsky's appeal to our sense of morality, however, we recognize that we cannot speak in the language of action without first acknowledging that the course taken will vary from individual to individual. And this is how it should be if we proceed from a basis of human dignity. To illustrate this point, we will talk briefly about two potential approaches, one of micro-politics and another at the macro-political level.

### **Micro-Politics and the Language of Action**

At the micro-political level, we should focus on the level of the individual school and participate with the principal and teachers in efforts to create and establish emancipatory practices. We cannot do this without a thorough understanding of the particular culture of the school in which we are working, for although schools look very much alike from a distance, they, like people, exhibit a robust individuality as we come to a fuller understanding of them. Ignoring these differences in the interest of creating general principles, which is the work of scholarship--and the language of critique--also can create suspicion and even hostility within individual sites at which we might otherwise profitably work.

Consequently, it is important that we understand how to work effectively in schools. For example, our basic stance must be that we are to work with people in the schools as partners in the struggles which have engaged their attentions, not on issues which might seem more important to us. We cannot overlook the phenomenological realities they perceive because, after all, realities are socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). It is only after we have demonstrated our commitment and established a level of trust that deeper issues can be engaged. For this reason, the way in which we gain entry to a school is important.

We have established numerous working relationships with public schools--evaluating programs; engaging in school-wide and district-wide renewal and reform initiatives. These seem to us useful ways to initiate discussions about the purposes of public schools. We have also used action research projects, either initiated in graduate university courses or (even better, we think) developed by the school itself, as a point of entry. Each of these strategies holds the advantage of involving the principal in a direct participatory way, and involvement of the principal has often been noted as a key factor in school improvement (Hord & Hall, 1987; Rutherford, 1985). Properly done, action research is empowering for its participants, offering opportunity for reflection and developing a growing sense of themselves as practical

intellectuals. The fact that most action research projects have a limited focus is not really a disadvantage since this leads to a realization that, although schools need a common focus, they need not be monolithic. And this realization, when acted upon, creates spaces that are based on an ethic of caring, to ripples of resistance that can lead to larger and more substantive changes. It is through a series of small changes that the ultimate objective is achieved--transformation of the culture in which individual teachers and learners interact.

That said, it is also important that as critical educators we ground our work in what is known about organizational change. Among the key concepts of change theory are the need to focus upon the concerns of individuals dealing with change and the understanding that change is a process rather than event. It is also crucial to realize that implementation of any significant change--such the modifications of attitudes and beliefs--often takes years. Thus, necessary attributes of change leaders includes patience and persistence; schools and communities grow through a stream of wise decisions rather than through pronouncements, no matter how well intentioned (Fullan, 1991). If we, as critical educators, are serious about improving schools at the micro-political level, we must commit ourselves to intensive and sustained work in particular sites.

### **Final Thoughts**

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge our deep appreciation of those whose writings frame our argument--for many years they have provided valuable critiques of the power of the state to curtail the creation of spheres of genuine democracy. McLaren and Giroux's espousal of a language of possibility encourages us, for without dreams our lives are surely impoverished. As Hannah Arendt noted "The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instill convictions, but to destroy the capacity to form any." For our own part, however, we have found ourselves moving beyond critique and possibility toward a language of action, a language that ensures that hopes for meaningful education and social justice are not merely idle dreams but become, instead, the visions that drive the institutions with which we work. We have seen such visions brought to fruition in a number of places around this country and have read of successes elsewhere, and we believe it is important to celebrate sites where people have created "a space in which the community of truth is practiced" (Palmer, 1990, p. 12). It is also important to identify where this has occurred without relying upon bureaucracy, charisma, or power, the traditional leadership mechanisms of Western societies, and where it aligns with the principles of liberation theology and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977).

It is because better institutions are not only possible but existent that we have committed ourselves to working with teachers and principals where they find themselves, believing that by doing so we will create together a language that makes possibilities real and enriches the lives of us all. We also understand that this language of action is a living thing that will manifest itself differently in each new place it takes root, and we believe this is how it should be. A language of action is always grounded in context, in the lived experience of particular people, and it grows out of our lives and work together.

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