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## More fully human: Principals as Freirian liberators

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## **More Fully Human: Principals as Freirean Liberators**

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### **Introduction**

This article calls for an investigation into a new breed of urban school leadership consistent with Freirean notions of *dialogue*, *praxis*, and *pedagogy* (Freire, 1993) in work with youth. Critical theorists have called for educational practices that emphasize the political role that teachers and students play in the educational process. Their vision of education calls for students to locate themselves in the historical process that has left them with little to count on and to struggle against social reproduction that gives life to the inequality that is so pernicious in capitalist American society. The central question is: How can principals mold critical understandings about education into a coherent model of liberatory leadership? An examination of the work of these critical theorists begins the analysis.

### ***A Central Paradox***

Exploring the implications for liberatory practice on the role of public school leaders is a journey that finds within itself a central paradox: liberatory principals, with the responsibility of operating a state-sponsored school, must fend off the influence of the state and its attendant economic and social inequities. Critical theorists, almost by definition, are wary of traditional forms of power and tend to address teachers much more than principals in much of their work. This role of the *teacher* (not principal) as a “public intellectual” (Giroux, 1992) is the

focus of much critical theory. The development of courageous, liberatory teachers who can navigate current political realities so that their students can read both “the word and the world” (Freire, 1993) seems to be the goal, not developing critical principals. To be sure, the role of the teacher in any liberatory project is essential, but scholars have also identified the inherent problems when a school leader does not support programs in his/her school (Hannay, 2001; McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001). If a school is charged with successfully educating a population that is seen by some as little more than fodder for the factories and prisons of a capitalist society (Willis, 1977), then collaboration among educators and educational leaders seems essential. Without it, courageous teachers swimming against the current soon become exhausted (Vibert & Portelli, 2000), or, even worse, fatalistic and hopeless (Freire, 1997). As Marilyn Frakenstein notes, “if the dialogical classroom experience is isolated ... then only fragments of critical consciousness can develop” (1987, p.201). There must be a role for principals in the liberatory project. As Friere (1990) notes:

The above does not mean that in the dialogical task there is no role for revolutionary leadership. It means merely that leaders—in spite of their important, fundamental, indispensable role—do not own the people and have no right to steer the people blindly towards their salvation. Such a salvation would be a mere gift from the leaders to the people—and a breaking of the dialogical bond between them, and a reducing of the people from co-authors of liberating action into the objects of this action. (p.168)

Thus, it seems that both principals and teachers need to work in concert to develop critical consciousness in their students. If one or the other does not commit fully to such a mission, the results may suffer. So how then do critical theorists, often wary of traditional sources of power such as the principal, propose that school leaders align themselves with a school-wide mission to foster a pedagogy that will allow students to view themselves as agents in history with the ability to name and struggle against forces of oppression?

### ***Bring Me Your Downtrodden***

Peter McLaren, in a memorial to Jim Montgomerie, a principal McLaren encountered early in his teaching career, writes that Jim was “an ethical rebel, an educational outlaw” (2003, p.179). Among the characteristics the McLaren cites as admirable in this school leader are his love and respect for students, his humanistic approach, his disdain for those bent on maintaining the status quo, and his lasting desire to fight discrimination. While McLaren states that Montgomerie was not a self-

pronounced critical educator, his constant attention to matters of social justice is commended. Here, McLaren recognizes that those who lead with an eye towards social justice and the rights of the disadvantaged are contributing to the struggle to overcome conditions of inequality. This gives some clue to how a principal-liberator might act. Since principals do not often have a teacher-like daily interaction with students, it certainly appears an important challenge for liberatory leaders is to be in contact with the lives (and futures) of their students.

### *Principals as Engaged Citizens*

Henry Giroux's definition of pedagogy reads:

a configuration of textual, verbal, and visual practices that seek to engage the processes through which people understand themselves and the ways in which they engage others and their environment. (1992, p. 3)

Clearly principals, as professionals deeply concerned with the growth of both teachers and students, can participate fully in such a process. They are, I would argue, central figures in guiding school practice and pedagogy for liberation. They can communicate the liberatory message to the entire school community. The advantages to a school if all teachers understand their agency and relationship to others are many. Teachers, in their role as "public intellectuals" (Giroux, 1992), could address school boards, parents, and the business community, resulting in better school funding, more support for students, and more consistent policy from board room to classroom. This vision of politically active teachers seems tied to the actions of the school principal. The realization of this vision also may be contingent upon principals who engage in transformational leadership (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999) and foster the individual growth of teachers and students. Principals concerned with only the day-to-day management of school operations are unlikely to inspire (or allow) teachers to address the community in such a direct way. Liberatory school leadership appears to be dependent on principals who encourage active participation with the community to address the problems of inequality.

Eventually, all leaders must sit down and dialogue with the oppressed people. Freire notes that "difficulties and problems will be far greater for... leaders... who try to carry out revolution *for* the people" (p. 127). Principals who attempt to revolutionize education as a gift for their students or community will often fail. The popularity of disseminating "best practices" and hiring "turnaround leaders" can be seen as examples of this type of action. The belief that school curriculum should be infused with a sense of place (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991) underscores this need for local influence on matters of schooling. Similarly, the two-way com-

munication mandated by Freire results in changes for both the students and educational leaders: “The revolution is made neither by the leaders for the people, nor by the people for the leaders, but by working together” (1990, p. 129). Leaders are often tempted, by humanistic tendencies, to “save” the oppressed in order to make their life easier. Freire tells us that this must not happen. Liberatory principals might be wise to engage the community in the creation of *their own* preferred future.

### ***The Purposes of Schooling***

Furthermore, the role of leaders is implicated in their vision of the purposes of schooling. An important check on the influence of capitalism on the classroom calls for a principal who can engage the broad school community in questioning the purpose of school and considering the growth of each individual’s ability to recognize their agency in the world (Willis, 1977; Giroux, 1992). In an American society in which the purposes for schooling range from babysitting, to the three Rs, to job training, to social development, viewing schools as laboratories where society is examined, discussed, and altered is truly a radical departure (Kleibard, 2004). The task of reorganizing even a single school around the notion of social justice is one that requires the active involvement of all staff, including leadership as well as the community. The courage that is often called for by critical educators (Regan & Brooks, 1995) must be present in administrators even though their jobs are the most endangered when schools venture from accepted norms.

Giroux’s concept of educators as *cultural workers* can be applied to the purpose-setting work of principals as much as the work of teachers. In grouping educators with writers and visual artists as a group whose work seeks to change the thinking or functioning of society, Giroux admits that they have tremendous power and responsibility—as well as many enemies. Among the responsibilities noted by Giroux is recognizing the “partial nature of our own views” (1992, p. 157). While charismatic leaders can quickly generate a following, those leaders who do not seek diverse opinions on the future of their organization risk unwittingly becoming a part of the oppressive social structure. Recognizing the limitations of one’s own viewpoint, while an essential skill for critical educators to teach their students, becomes even more important for school leaders whose decisions affect even greater numbers of people. Giroux’s notion of establishing *borderlands* where people of varying perspectives can dialogue about schooling becomes important here. The concepts of community partnerships (Epstein, 1995) and student input (Fullan, 2001) combine with the “official” logic of the school to foster a dialogue about

possible futures for educating youth. Instead of persuasive explanation, or empty participation, dialogue is a process in which humans can utilize empathy to understand other perspectives and share their personal voice in the teaching of others. Principals encouraging and engaging in these sorts of activities are modeling a method of interacting with the world for their teachers and students. This dialogic method is one that holds an important role for principals dedicated to relieving conditions of oppression (Freire, 1990).

### ***Merchants of Hope***

Perhaps the most important characteristic for principals seeking to combat inequality is the importance of hope. Giroux's pedagogy "is predicated on a notion of learned hope, forged amidst the realization of risks, and steeped in a commitment to transforming public culture and life" (1992, p. 99). It is obvious here that educating for liberation is neither for the lazy nor the cowardly. This relation of hope to critical practice has been a rollercoaster ride of tantalizing intrigue and cold empirical realities. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) posit a model of schooling under late capitalism that offers little hope of destabilizing the role of schools in churning out workers for the industrial machine. Glimmers of hope can be seen, however, in Paul Willis' *Learning to Labor* (1977). The "lads" in his study are described as combining incisive understandings of the role of schools in capitalist societies, while at the same time being unable to leverage these understandings into social action due to disorganization and their own racial and gender biases. But the existence of these *penetrations* into the workings of capitalist institutions offer some hope for organized resistance. More recently, De los Reyes and Gozemba (2002) share exemplars of educators winning small victories in the battle to allow our children to grow up fully human. In leading the way to an optimistic future, principal-liberators must be aware that the present that they have inherited is dynamic and that they, as moral human agents, have a responsibility to help create an optimistic future. Principals, above all, must believe that the way things are is not the way things have to be. Students suffer when school leaders work their way down externally imposed to-do lists in lieu of critically and authentically engaging the cultural forces that reproduce discrimination and injustice. Armed with a steeled sense of hope, principals may be more prepared to engage the often formidable bureaucratic machine.

### ***Democratic Role Models***

Much more specific advice is given to principal-liberators by Paulo

Freire in his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1990). While the leaders he speaks of are not principals in traditional North-American schools, his vision of revolutionary leadership for radical democracy is an essential starting point for principals seeking to apply critical theory in their daily work. Freire must be viewed, first and foremost, as an educator, and he reminds us that “leaders cannot treat the oppressed as mere activists” (1990, p. 126). While he gained notoriety for his community organizing work, it all began with the project of teaching poor, rural Brazilians to read. To Freire, the oppressed must engage in praxis (thought and action) to address what they see as oppressive forces in their world. Both the leader and the oppressed must come together in a dialogical fashion to teach each other about their respective worlds. The needs of the oppressed cannot be determined, objectively, by the leaders. If this idea pertains to the school setting, then it might be seen in principals engaging students in the creation of curricula and programs that address the problems that resonate in their socially mediated lives. The notion of user-design (Carr-Chellman, 2006) may be important here. Programs imposed from above, no matter how well thought out, deny the students the chance to read their world and to change it. In this light, principals must ensure not only that their students can read and write, but that they have the ability and confidence to interact with the world around them.

Often, a magnetic leader gains popularity by prescribing a path towards freedom for the oppressed. The long-term stability of such a venture is dubious without dialogue engaging the people. Those who dominate the oppressed often act this way, but liberators cannot. Since “leaders cannot treat the oppressed as their possession” (Freire, 1993, p. 126), principals must authentically interact with the school community to allow praxis. Only then are sustainable solutions likely. Only in solidarity together (teachers, principals, students, community), can a principal-liberator accomplish this work. Attempting to carry out a revolution *for* the oppressed treats them as incompetent individuals who need others to look out for them, further worsening their condition.

A respect for the intelligence of the students and a rejection of “the myth of the ignorance of the people” (Freire, 1990, p. 134) is another hallmark of Freirean leadership. In urban schools, it is easy to fall victim to stories about “these students” and what they can and cannot do (Delpit, 1995). Principals, above all, must recognize the nascent intelligence in the 9<sup>th</sup> grader who cannot read and in the troubled student who deals with anger through violence. A true appreciation for every human being is at the heart of democratic life and should be a goal of a revolutionary principal. Revolutionary leaders must identify with the

oppressed, gamble their fate on the fate of the oppressed, and engage people in a struggle for equality. Principals cannot expect state-sponsored solutions to address the causes of inequality. They must organize their community to fight the unjust conditions of inadequate facilities, inequitable school funding, less-skilled teachers, and unequal school safety (Kozol, 1991). Only when such democratic steps are taken, and small, shared successes accomplished, will communities gather around their leaders and live out the promises of democracy.

The literature on critical theory gives us many insights into how school principals may contribute to the project of altering the societal forces that benefit some to the detriment of others. School leaders seeking to end conditions of racism, classism, and sexism must walk a delicate line on their journey towards liberation. On one hand, they must be courageous and motivated enough to engage in the grueling work of undoing centuries of institutionalized and normalized social relations. But on the other, they must be aware that their leadership is only as strong as the support of their followers. In order to encourage strong support, honest dialogue and shared goals must emerge between the principal and the school community.

### **The Freirean Educator Literature**

The majority of what is written about critical theory is rare in teacher preparation programs in the U.S. (Macedo, 1998). And in my experience, this work is also noticeably absent in several alternative-certification programs that prepare college graduates to teach in under-served public schools. Because of this, some educators have sought to make the radical ideas of critical pedagogy more accessible to practitioners and have published books with titles such as: *Critical Pedagogy: Notes from the Real World* and *Freire for the Classroom*. These works, among others, attempt to operationalize critical pedagogy in a way that is clear to educators. Using classroom examples and less-theoretical terminology than the authors mentioned previously, they hope to diffuse these ideas more broadly. While the focus here is almost solely on the teacher, one can glean leadership actions that will support the liberatory teaching outlined in these works. It is this Freirean educator literature and its lessons for creating liberatory leadership practices that I will discuss next.

Eileen de los Reyes and Patricia Gozemba (2002) outline critical projects taken up by teachers in a variety of locations within the United States. These projects can inform the search for a theory of liberatory leadership. Within a Peer Education Program (PEP) at Roosevelt High School in Honolulu, Hawaii, the authors note the joy felt by the PEP

teacher when her program was publicly praised by the principal to a school visitor. "I was very touched that here was the leader of the school who appreciated the program as much as I did and who saw the impact that mediation and that kind of approach could have on a school" (p. 63). As demonstrated in this case, a principal's support of these liberatory projects validates the hard work put in by teachers. A few kind words from a principal might just ensure the continued existence of the program.

Another emancipatory project takes place at the Cambridge-Rindge and Latin School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. De los Reyes and Gozemba (2002) offer their description of the *Project 10 East* program started by a teacher concerned about the violent climate towards gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) students in the school. GLBT students and those concerned about discrimination in their school would gather in art teacher Al Ferreira's classroom, sit around his big round table and sort out the issues (both private and public) that concerned them. The students organized support for students within the group, established a telephone hotline for troubled/suicidal students, and spread their message of acceptance to other schools and even the state legislature. Most of the credit for establishing this courageous initiative goes to teacher Al Ferreira. The principal of the school, Edward Sarasin, is shown to outwardly praise the program to students and support the program by helping them find better classroom space and cutting the teaching load of Mr. Ferreira. The principal is in no way associated with the creation or vision behind this program but, instead, is involved as a sponsor.

While both of these examples have positive things to say about the involvement of principals, their involvement is described merely as that of cheerleader and patron, but never an active participant or visionary leader. This serves as a reminder to the challenges facing principals who support liberatory pedagogy in their schools. History is not on their side. While there is a small but supportive national community of educators committed to issues of social justice, there does not appear to be commensurate support for principals undertaking the same work.

Shor examines teachers who apply Freirean pedagogy in his book *Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching* (1987). While beginning with some more theoretical chapters, the heart of the book contains examples of classroom teachers who engage their students with a critical pedagogy that seeks to teach content while at the same time show the students that the world is a changeable place and that they have the power to change it. In one chapter, a teacher of adult basic mathematics in a community college setting shows how the seemingly value-free world of statistics can become laden with deception and bias when there is a stake in telling a certain version of events

(Frankenstein, 1987). She gives the example of hiding portions of the military budget under the headings of *Social Security* and *Department of Energy* to deflate the published military spending figure. In another chapter, Ira Shor relates his experiences with critical pedagogy as an English teacher at a small college. His notion of the “withering away” (1987, p. 109) of the teacher so that the students become the center of the class is exemplified in the ways he opens the class at the beginning of each semester, the personal writing topics he assigns early-on, and his strategy of using the spoken voice as a method of writing and proof-reading. Student strengths (verbal ability, knowledge of personal experience) are built upon to achieve higher levels of literacy while they discover their true agency in the wider world.

But it must be noted again that no mention of supervisors or community expectations is given in these chapters. Both of Shor’s examples come from higher education where, generally, greater academic freedom exists than in the traditional K-12 context. In fact, of the twelve chapters from Shor’s book, only one is set in a K-12 school. And this high school happens to be located in the affluent Boston suburb of Newton, hardly the place Freire had in mind when developing his pedagogy over thirty years ago. The over-representation of data from higher education in Shor’s volume may point to the difficulty of utilizing a critical approach in the heavily monitored and generally conservative K-12 context. This points to a challenge for principals who wish to see such liberatory teaching in their schools- they must acknowledge the fact that primary and secondary schools tend to be conservative places and that any attempts to implement radically democratic pedagogy must be well-planned and prepared to deal with opposition. But there are things that can be done, as the next author shows.

Wink (2002) looks at critical pedagogy from her multiple roles as a classroom teacher, mother, and college professor. She describes, for teachers, how one can *do* critical pedagogy in response to complaints that the extant literature on this potentially useful theory is challenging to read and act upon. She describes techniques such as problem posing, popcorn, pair-share, and dialogue journals that could certainly be used in a way that did not at all further the democratic goals of critical pedagogy, but that can dovetail nicely with the student-centered and human-agency dimensions of critical theory. In the KWL strategy, for example, students begin a learning activity by brainstorming a list of facts they already know about the subject at hand. Next, they create a list of questions they would like to know the answers to by the end of their study. These activities help to “decenter” (Giroux, 1992) the text and establish the learners as equal partners in the educational endeavor.

In her description of problem-posing education, Wink (2000) gives four points for teachers and learners to keep in mind in using this Freirean strategy:

Teachers and learners...

- (1) trust each other;
- (2) believe that their involvement will matter;
- (3) understand resistance and institutional barriers to change;
- (4) are aware of their own power and knowledge.

One can see how a principal must adopt these same four points in his/her relations with teacher and students. Additionally, the principal must allow for a certain amount of methodological and curricular flexibility if teachers are to employ techniques that call for large amounts of social development and reflection. These are skills that are often left out of the written school curriculum in America. A principal must be prepared to defend a teacher's choice of methods if these are skills that the school community values. In the current political environment, social development and reflection often take a backseat to meeting standards and accountability targets. Liberatory principals should work to emphasize the importance of all of these things. Additionally, Wink (2000) gives her version of a "what works" list in terms of critical pedagogy and meaningful learning. In Table 1, her tips are paired with my suggestions for principals who support critical teachers.

While the literature on teacher-implementation of Freirean pedagogy does allow for some insights into how a school principal might create and support such practices, the data for K-12 schools with more than nominal principal participation is sparse at best. As Table 1 shows, many of the principal behaviors in the right-hand column are little more than realigning budget items or establishing new priorities for professional development. In their reaching out to teachers, these authors often neglect the role of principals. They adhere to the adage that "one does not change the 'face' of schools through the central office" (Freire, 1998, ix) but through the courageous and caring acts of teachers. In these works principals are often caricatured as conservative bureaucrats (Wink, 2000) or faceless disciplinarians (McLaren, 2003) who, at best, can give financial and logistical support to a project (de los Reyes & Gozemba, 2002). Why this negative portrayal? Perhaps principals have fallen victim to the paradox of power seeking to limit the influence of power and have chosen to abandon the search for a primary role in establishing critical pedagogy on a school-wide basis. Or perhaps the tremendous work involved in such a project has left such principals with no desire, or no time, to write about it. Whichever the case, a theory of school leadership for liberation is still elusive.

**Table 1.**  
**Teacher and Principal Actions Supporting Critical Pedagogy**

<i>Critical Pedagogy “What works” for teachers (Wink, 2000, pg. 159, 167)</i>	<i>Principal actions that would support this teacher action</i>
Reflecting	Establish lesson study groups, provide “in-school” time for reflection, provide video equipment
Conceptualizing and articulating your own philosophical assumptions	Provide for graduate study, engage teachers in listing/discussing their assumptions
Understanding why and how beliefs change	Provide for graduate study, create small discussion groups within the faculty
Naming the power structures: critically acting and reflecting on them	Provide for graduate study, engage faculty in discussing power and privilege, bring in community members
Relearning and unlearning	Modeling this process and talking about it
Acknowledging the powerful emotions of power, racism, classism, sexism	Engage faculty in discussing power and privilege, bringing in parents and students to dialogue with teachers
Understanding and being able to articulate the new global realities	Engaging faculty in creating a vision of the future and how the school will function in it
Challenging our long-held assumptions about teaching and learning	School buys subscriptions to research journals, provides for graduate study
Reading hard books	Provide teachers with individual/department/whole-faculty professional libraries
Entering into dialogue	Providing classrooms conducive to discussion (furniture, time, minimal interruptions), maintaining a flexible curriculum that is open to student needs
Recognizing the contradictions in our own lives	One-on-one conversations with the principal
Recognizing your own power, expertise, knowledge, and role	Comprehensive supervision system, setting goals for personal and professional growth, involvement with professional organizations and other schools

—Table 1 Continued on Next Page—

**Table 1 (continued)**

<i>Critical Pedagogy “What works” for teachers (Wink, 2000, pg. 159, 167)</i>	<i>Principal actions that would support this teacher action</i>
Seeing with new eyes	Release time to observe other classes/schools
Taking time and creating a safe place	Give utmost attention to the physical and emotional safety of students and teachers
Be passionate about your subject matter	Provide content-deepening professional development opportunities
Know students and their backgrounds	Involve parents in all school activities and decisions, organize home visits, involve community organizers/historians in school activities
Involve the families as citizens of the classroom	Create volunteer schedules for parental involvement, contact parent employers to investigate the possibility of paid community service hours
Allow students to explore and time to sit and think	Maintain a flexible curriculum that is open to student needs, adaptable uses of space for individual and group work
Provide meaningful, practical, relevant information	Updated library materials, individual teacher budgets for classroom books
Show students how to access and generate new information	Qualified librarian, well-stocked library, abundance of networked computers
Ask “why” a lot	Professional development on student questioning
Make sure students see you reading	Provide all-school reading time, establish a non-academic teacher/student sharing library, school read-a-thons

### **A Model for Liberatory Educational Leadership**

Many have attempted formulating a model for leadership that seeks to create students who can critically examine the world and their place in it (Freire, 1990; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004, Bates, 2006). In Freire’s (1990) model, leaders have intimate contact with students and forge the bonds of solidarity in the fight against oppression.

They learn from one another and engage in rebuilding the structures that govern daily life. The great number of students in a school headed by one principal makes this model not wholly adaptable to the modern school leader. Larson and Murtadha (2002) offer a vision of leadership driven by a concern for social justice. Their analysis leads to a model of leadership organized under three general headings: *Rethinking leadership for poor and marginalized school communities*, *organizing multicultural communities through democratic leadership*, and *developing human capacity and life chances through education*. While these categories put the school leader in the right affective frame of mind, they give a mostly descriptive account of the historical progress of liberatory leadership instead of a prescriptive framework that might be used by principals to guide their practice. Furman and Gruenewald (2004) tie traditional notions of social justice with environmental concerns to create a more unified theory of leadership for socioecological justice. The importance they place on community-oriented schooling is applauded and should be put in to practice. But it is perhaps overly focused on the ecological aspects of schooling to the detriment of other factors. Bates (2006) describes the philosophical basis of social justice as it relates to educational administration, but tends to focus on recognizing the roots of inequality as opposed to creating a map for educational leaders to follow.

I propose a model that contains three elements at varying levels of specificity. Believing that social justice is indeed a process, (not merely a goal) I am comfortable with elements of the model that might take extended periods of time to implement. And given the participative, dialogic nature of any emancipatory project, I propose this model as an idea to be discussed, contested, and altered by local leaders in local contexts. The three elements of the model involve: curriculum, community, and character.

### ***1. Curriculum Must Breach the Walls of the Schoolhouse***

As Freire notes, “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (1990, p. 79). Education is not complete once the mind possesses what it needs to know. It is completed by interacting with the world and proving the agency of the student. Bogotch (2002) cites Studs Terkell’s conversation with an activist/science teacher who felt his mission was incomplete with a mere coverage of science concepts and facts. Students’ authentic engagement with the world was the only capstone appropriate to the cognitive information successfully mastered in the class. Similarly, Furman and Gruenewald (2004) support a strategy of *action research*

for educators teaching for social justice. Their call for “participation in the political process that determines what they are and what they will become” (pg. 60) summarizes this idea. Just as Cambridge-Rindge and Latin students argued in front of their state representatives and Roosevelt High students traveled to schools throughout Hawaii to expand their Peer Educators Program (de los Reyes & Gozemba, 2002), marginalized students must come to see the world as the perfect canvas on which to leave their mark. If education for marginalized students consists merely of meeting content standards as determined by the ruling classes, they will always come up short and continue to fill the lowest paying jobs and the least desirable neighborhoods (Willis, 2003). Education for oppressed students must point out the fact that the cards are always stacked in favor of those already in power. Once recognizing this fact, marginalized students can begin to interact, and even change, the rules of the game that is set up so that they will lose. Coming to this understanding is a long term goal, not one that can be met in a class period, unit, or even a single school year. But what can principals do to foster this understanding in students? They can allow for a flexible curriculum that is not bound to tradition but is responsive to the needs of the students and the community. They can push teachers to make connections with the world beyond their classroom door. Making outside visitors and investigations a normal part of schooling encourages this. Liberatory principals must encourage this action-in-the-world while at the same time giving teachers the ability to design a curriculum that fits the needs of their students. The act of creating a liberatory pedagogy is not an engineering problem to be solved and maintained, but is “work that is continuous and recursive” (Bogotch, 2002). The ongoing cycle of curriculum development in liberatory settings must recognize the world beyond the schoolhouse gate.

## ***2. The Community Is Central***

In our country, local real estate taxes pay for the majority of the costs of educating our youth. Despite the “savage inequalities” (Kozol, 1991) this causes between wealthy districts and poor ones, it should guarantee an amount of local control. More importantly, the principal and staff of a school, along with students and parents, form the world in which our future leaders are raised. Principals are challenged to transform the wishes and needs of the community into school-based practices. “Everyone has both the right and the responsibility to be involved in decisions that affect the school community” (Shields, LaRocque, & Oberg, 2002, p. 129). This ethical view to local control means that student performance on a

statewide exam is only one of the measures a school should be judged on. In this age of the shrinking curriculum, the purposes of schooling must be democratically constructed by local stakeholders (Furman & Gruenwald, 2004; Carr, 1997).

Principals who seek to liberate their students have no choice in this matter. The process of negotiating these purposes and the potential for differences between in-district constituencies and with state and national governing bodies requires the utmost courage of liberatory principals. The nobility of this demand is stated eloquently by Larson and Murtagh:

Many of our schools are hungry for leaders who will stand with their communities and against policies that divert education and resources away from the real needs of children and their families. (2002, p. 157)

While a principal must ensure that meaningful teaching is taking place (Freire, 1987; Furman & Shields, 2003), an obligation exists to take a “moral stand” (Begley, 2005) when the needs of the community are jeopardized. This is said not to trivialize the often contradictory forces in any given community, but to demarcate the difference between local and non-local demands on a school. Walking this tightrope between community needs and governmental expectations will clearly be the most technically demanding aspect of liberatory school leadership for the short-term future. The risks a principal takes in siding with the community are very real and could upend a job or even a career. But it is part of the bigger project of discovering that we need to “recognize and account for the social conditions in the community and school” (Vilbert & Portelli, 2000, p.25). Employing this *politics of difference* (Giroux, 1992) is required at the school level and at the level of the individual student in order to prevent the reproduction of unjust social hierarchies. Liberatory principals are more than educators; they must be community activists (Cranston, 2003; Oakes & Lipton, 2002). It is only when teamed with the community that liberatory principals can work to dismantle systems of oppression that persist despite the best intentions of talented and well-meaning individuals

### ***3. Liberatory Leaders See the World as a Work in Progress***

Freire (1990) tells us that the key difference between humans and animals is our ability to speak abstractly about the world and alter it. Whereas animals merely live within the world—unable to do anything but react to its environment—humans can think, organize, and take action when their environment becomes inhospitable. Oppressive forces such as racism, sexism, and classism attempt to force humans to live

silently within the world, rather than interact with it. Freire states, “those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression” (1990, p. 88). Similarly, the nurturing of student *voice* (McLaren, 2003) is central to a student being able to interact with the world in a meaningful way. Marginalized students often have their voices silenced by unwritten policies that discount their opinions and beliefs as those of “the other.” Ellsworth (1989) warns, however, that the voice of the oppressed is often interpreted as “talk back” or “defiant speech” (p. 310) by the community at large. In this way, the status quo remains essentially unchallenged.

In the saddest cases, such oppressed persons adopt the voice of the oppressor as the only way to understand their condition. Freire tells a story of a Chilean peasant who commented on his oppressed condition, “What can I do? It is the will of God and I must accept it” (1990, p. 164). In response to the possibility of this type of permanently marginalized existence, liberatory educators must train themselves to view the world as a place of limitless possibility inhabited by people of unlimited potential. While neither the world nor its inhabitants have maximized this potential, the possibility for change, agency, and growth must remain central to the actions of school leaders. Furman and Shields (2003) include *processual* and *transformational* dimensions to their model of leadership for social justice. Citing Starrat (1994), they insist that “leaders for social justice and democratic community would need to engage in the ‘ethic of critique’ as well as encouraging others to do so” (p. 27). This point of view, in which people and institutions are works-in-progress, enables leaders, along with their community, to reconstruct their institutions so that negotiated community values are upheld.

### **Conclusion**

Some look at schools and, disparaged by the unequal status of many groups in society, say, “If schools and their leaders aren’t going to address the continued oppression of certain segments of our school populations, then whose job is it?” (Larson & Murtadha, 2002). Others look at schools and say, “If schools and their leaders aren’t going to ensure that all students meet grade level standards, then whose job is it?” (Furman & Shields, 2003). It appears that we must, as a profession, address both camps successfully in order to meet any of the individual arguments. It holds that education that oppresses will make whatever academic standards are met meaningless, and it also holds that schools that do not fulfill their academic function are only contributing to the oppression

of their own students in our commoditized society. As Paul Willis noted almost thirty years ago, “no conceivable number of certificates amongst the working class will make for a classless society” (1977, p. 127).

This leads me to believe that chasing the mythical “high standards” for these urban students may not solve the problems that fester in the lives of our marginalized populations. They will still be educated in the oldest buildings, have the fewest extra-curricular opportunities, and have the least qualified teachers. Only leadership that engages students with their world, participates in dialogue with the community, and views all things as changeable stands a chance of reversing the inequities that continue to remain in place. Although I have tried here, it is not truly possible to enumerate a list of *best practices* for principals to use as a primer for liberation. The multitude of forms in which oppression manifests itself prevents this. However, school leaders truly dedicated to removing practices that have historically favored some people over others can use the ideas presented here in their tireless work with the communities that they lead.

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