

which we live is desperately menaced, not by [the cold war] but from within. So any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to “go for broke.” Or to put it another way, “you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won’t happen. . . . [And yet] the obligation of anyone who thinks of him- or herself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change” (Baldwin, 1988, p. 3).

I read the words of the famed African-American novelist James Baldwin less as a prescription for cynicism and powerlessness than I do as an expression of hope. Baldwin’s words are moving because he confers a sense of moral and political responsibility upon teachers by presupposing that they are critical agents who can move between theory and practice in order to take risks, refine their visions, and make a difference for both their students and the world in which they live. In order to take up Baldwin’s challenge for teachers to “go for broke,” to act in the classroom and the world with courage and dignity, it is important for educators to recognize that the current challenge facing public schools is one of the most serious that any generation of existing and prospective teachers has ever had to face. Politically, the U.S. has lived through 12 years of reforms in which teachers have been invited to deskill themselves, to become technicians, or, in more ideological terms, to accept their role as “clerks of the empire.” We live at a time when state legislators and federal officials are increasingly calling for the testing of teachers and the implementation of standardized curriculum; at the same time, legislators and government officials are ignoring the most important people in the reform effort, the teachers. Within this grim scenario, the voices of

teachers have been largely absent from the debate about education. It gets worse.

Economically, the working conditions of teachers, especially those in the urban districts with a low tax base, have badly deteriorated. The story is a familiar one: overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources, low salaries, and a rise in teacher-directed violence. In part, this is due to the increased financial cutbacks to the public sector by the Federal Government, the tax revolt of the 1970s by the middle-class that put a ceiling on the ability of cities and states to raise revenue for public services, and the refusal by wide segments of the society to believe that public schooling is essential to the health of a democratic society. Compounding these problems is a dominant vision of schooling defined largely through the logic of corporate values and the imperatives of the marketplace. Schools are being treated as if their only purpose were to train future workers, and teachers are being viewed as corporate foot soldiers whose role is to provide students with the skills necessary for the business world. In short, part of the crisis of teaching is the result of a vision of schooling that subordinates issues of equity, community, and social justice to pragmatic considerations that enshrine the marketplace and accountability schemes that standardize the social relations of schooling. The political and ideological climate does not look favorable for teachers at the moment. But it does offer prospective and existing teachers the challenge to engage in dialogue and debate regarding important issues such as the nature and purpose of teacher preparation, the meaning of educational leadership, and the dominant forms of classroom teaching.

I think that if existing and future teachers are willing to “go for broke,” to use Baldwin’s term, they will need to re-imagine teaching as part of a project of critique and possibility. But there is more at stake here than simply a change in who controls the conditions under which teachers work. This is important, but what is also needed is a new language, a new way of naming, ordering, and representing how power works in schools. It is precisely through a more critical language that