

- Every community must shape its own path to excellence.
- Through listening, leaders can create the conditions for equitable school transformation.

These beliefs represent an unwavering faith in people and democracy that runs counter to the educational policies of the early 21st century, when policymakers increasingly tried to control and “teacher-proof” schools with pacing guides, rigid curricula, and centralized assessments. Well, enough is enough. It’s time to entrust leaders, educators, and communities to chart their own course. We begin by exploring the critical challenges that listening can help correct.

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## KEY CHALLENGE 1: THE PERSISTENCE OF INEQUITY

*Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

—JAMES BALDWIN<sup>3</sup>

Listening Leadership will help you make progress on the fundamental issue facing American public schools: inequity. Far too many children continue to attend substandard schools and receive a low-quality education. In a groundbreaking article, authors Eugene Eubanks, Ralph Parish, and Dianne Smith explain how the dominant language of school improvement serves to maintain the status quo and perpetuate inequitable outcomes. They call this Discourse I and furnish familiar examples:<sup>4</sup>

- Children “need more structure” because they are “from disadvantaged conditions” or “from single parent families” or “working families” or are “more dangerous.”
- Teachers participate in “staff development,” “in-service,” and “school improvement,” which have evolved to mean that “people in schools can go through a process that appears to be change oriented but, in fact, has not resulted in any substantial improvement of student learning.”
- Staff may say, “We’re a school in transition. Things have changed; students just aren’t what they used to be. You just can’t teach as much as you used to.”

To be clear, as coauthor Smith reminded me in an interview, discourse isn't just the words educators speak. It includes our beliefs; our values; our perceptions of children from urban communities; and our perceptions of race, racism, and gender equality in schools. Recent research at Johns Hopkins University confirms the power of perception in a study demonstrating that White teachers tend to have lower expectations of African American students. For example, White teachers were 30% less likely than their Black colleagues to believe that the same African American student would graduate from a 4-year college and 40% less likely to believe that the student would graduate from high school.<sup>5</sup>



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As leaders, we have the power to transform this reality by first listening to the ways in which our schools and districts talk about, think about, and organize the work of improvement. Listening Leaders tune in to the power of perception and language and model a shift toward Discourse II, in which uncomfortable truths are laid squarely on the table for discussion. (Table 1.1 summarizes the differences between Discourse I and II.) They reject a quick-fix mentality, taking time to ask hard questions and examine root

**TABLE 1.1 DISCOURSE I VS. DISCOURSE II**

Discourse I	Discourse II
Language typically used to talk about, question, and design the work of school improvement. Discourse I maintains the status quo while appearing to respond to demands for change.	Language that names uncomfortable, unequal, ineffective, prejudicial conditions and relationships in schools. Discourse II explores the root causes of inequity and models an inquiry approach to improvement.
Attributes	Attributes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Singular truths</li> <li>• Answers and technical fixes</li> <li>• Symptoms</li> <li>• Improving what exists</li> <li>• Externalization/"looking out the window"</li> <li>• Limited time and ability</li> <li>• Reproduction of inequity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple stories</li> <li>• Inquiry, adaptive challenges, and root causes</li> <li>• Causes</li> <li>• Changing something significant</li> <li>• Internal reflection/"looking in the mirror"</li> <li>• Getting started anyway</li> <li>• Transformation</li> </ul>

Adapted with permission from "The Nature of Discourse in Education," by the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, now the National Equity Project, 2004.

causes. And they ensure that colleagues of color and those from other historically marginalized groups feel safe enough to share their perspectives and experiences. Table 1.2 provides examples of shifting the discourse, and Exhibit 1.1 models how a white ally can practice Discourse II.

For students to attend humanizing schools, adults must *work in* humanizing schools. Every grown-up who enters your building—whether he or she is a custodian, parent, paraprofessional, or teacher—should feel seen, heard, and valued. This begins with listening—not to external demands, but to your own community and to what you believe is right.

**TABLE 1.2 EXAMPLES OF SHIFTING THE DISCOURSE**

Area	Discourse I	Shifting to Discourse II
Academic data and equity	The achievement gap	The opportunity gap or the “education debt” to historically disenfranchised students. <sup>a</sup>
Time and change	“We don’t have time for all this talking and processing about equity. We have students to teach!”	“Changing the status quo takes courage and time. We need to make a long-term investment and still get started somewhere.”
Student behavior	“We can’t let <i>those</i> students interrupt others’ learning.”	“It seems like there’s a cultural disconnect between some of our staff and students. As a result, Black and Latino boys are frequently getting kicked out of class. How do we consciously name and address this pattern?”
Student expectations	“Not all our students are college material. Some of them would just do better in the trades or remedial classes.”	“We have to ensure that all of our students have choices, just as we did as young people. How do we guarantee that every student is college- <i>ready</i> so she is empowered to make a decision about her future?”
Universalism vs. targeted support	“We want <i>all</i> students to succeed. We make decisions to serve <i>all</i> students’ needs.”	“According to our data, we are struggling to meet the needs of English language learners (ELL students). How can we build our capacity as ELL instructors and culturally responsive practitioners?”
Instruction	“I teach the content. It’s just that the kids are lazy and don’t want to do the work.”	“How will we know students have learned the content? How can we differentiate based on interests, learning modalities, and culturally responsive practices to engage every student in the learning process?”

<sup>a</sup> Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3–12.



## MAKE IT MINDFUL

Take a few minutes to jot down your thoughts on these questions:

- In your context, how do people think about and talk about school improvement?
- What common examples of Discourse I would you like to shift?
- What would Discourse II sounds like?

### EXHIBIT 1.1 WHITE ALLIES AND DISCOURSE II

In November 2015, Black student leaders at the University of Missouri initiated a wave of protests against the university president for his mishandling of certain racist incidents. The football team, including White players and coaches, went on strike, and within 3 days the president had resigned. A backlash by White students ensued, including anonymous death threats to students of color. Should students be required to attend classes in this environment?

Here's the stance of one White professor, Bradley Harrison Smith, which I offer as an example of Discourse II practiced by a White ally. In this Facebook post (<https://www.facebook.com/bradley.t.smith.587/posts/10100549703032872>), Smith directly names the unequal experience of students of color and White students and "looks in the mirror" to consider his own potential complicity in an unjust scenario.

I'm writing to tell you that I'm cancelling class tomorrow (Wednesday 11/11/15).

The truth is, despite all of the threats on social media, I would still probably feel safe on campus were we to have class. But that's because I am a white man. I would not feel safe were this not the case.

By holding class at our regular time, I would be forcing my students who do and probably should feel threatened to implicitly disobey me in order to protect their lives by not attending my class.

Which means that, were I to tell you something like, "We are going to still have class, but stay home if you don't feel safe . . ." (which is what I originally planned to say) I think I would be participating in the marginalization of minority students by tacitly supporting an educational environment in which certain students feel safe while others cannot. Attending class tomorrow, in light of the recent threats, would be a privilege not available to all my students, and I have therefore decided it will not be a privilege for any of my students.