

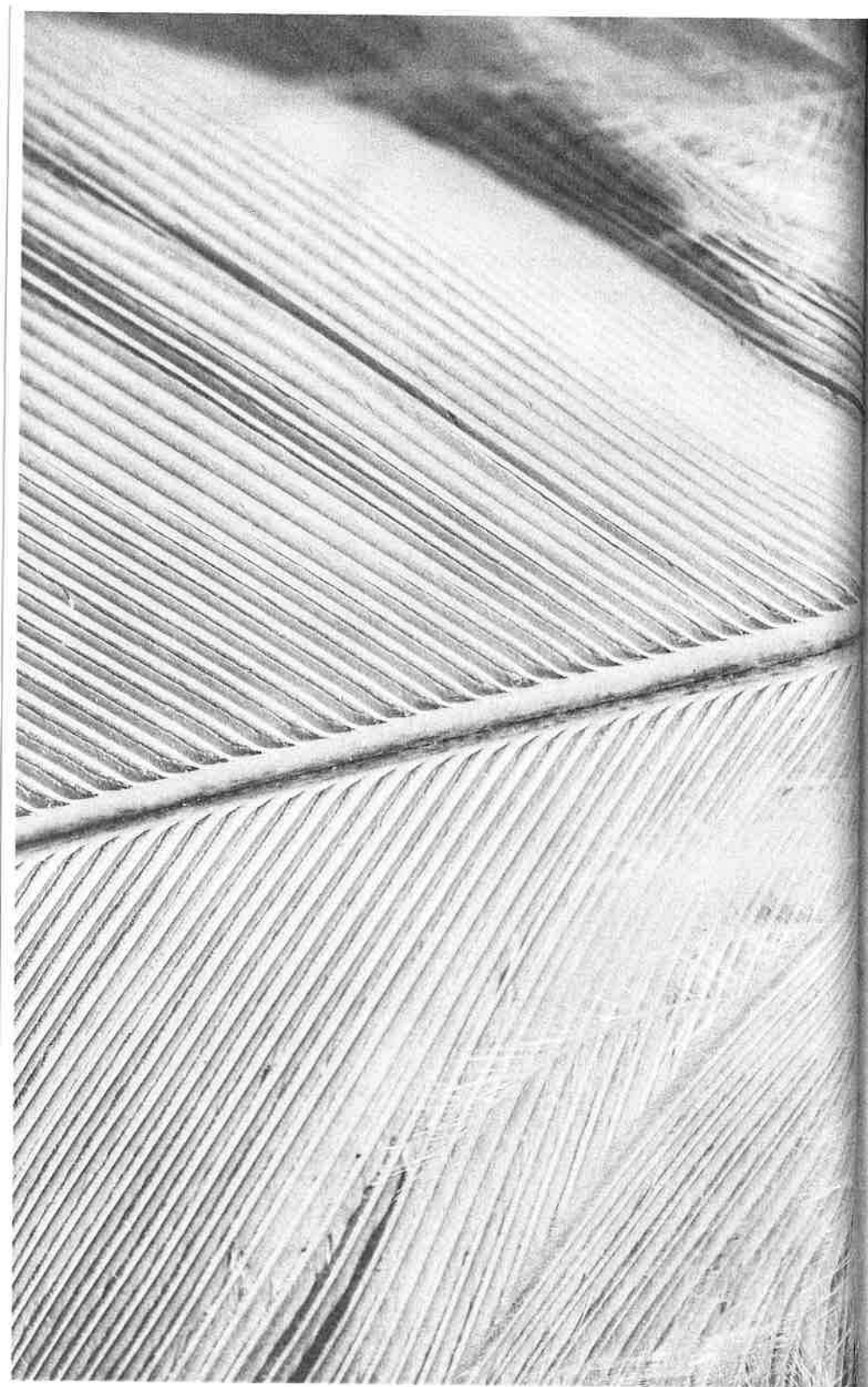
THE FOUNDATION FOR THE ROW COLLECTION

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from
Teaching

to
Thinking

A Pedagogy *for*
Reimagining Our Work



WINGS OF THE SAME BIRD

*We hear the voices of our parents,
our elders, our teachers,
those that came before us
and with us*

*We were kids
who cared about justice
We are freedom fighters,
resistance
resistance*

*We are teachers for transformation
Workers, in this for the long haul*

*We are not only undoing,
We are building something strong*

We are all wings of the same bird

*that bird is called ...
hope, survival, movement, mentoring,
power, empowerment, generativity,
change, stubborn,
life-giving
victory
And she will fly.*

—Katie Kissinger⁶



A Principle for Reimagining Our Work: Anchor Organizational Systems in Vision and Values

Three core elements shape the life of a community that learns:

- **Vision** that guides it: Who are we as a community?
- **Values** that serve as touch-points for decisions: How will we live into our vision?
- **Systems and practices** that embody and amplify vision and values: How will we express ourselves?

We do a complex dance with these three elements. We're biased towards systems, quick to think in practical terms about logistical details, about doing and fixing, about acting and responding. As organizational leaders, a focus on systems can consume our days; we live with daily pressure to be solvers of problems, efficiently navigating the structural and practical challenges that arrive in our programs with dependable frequency. Vision and values can be overshadowed by systems.

As pedagogical leaders, though, striving to nurture a community that learns, our great work, our important work, is to tend as diligently to vision and values as we do to systems—to let systems be an outgrowth of deliberate

attention to vision and values. This is where the dance begins. It's not enough simply to articulate a vision and values for a program: it is essential to create the organizational circumstances in which vision and values are lively and in motion. Yet a concentrated focus on systems can distract us from thoughtful, regular consideration of vision and values. When we do the dance well, we are attentive, thoughtful, and deliberate, constantly braiding vision, values, and organizational systems.

Who Are We as a Community? Living with Vision

Vision guides an intentional culture. To get at vision, we ask questions like:

- What is the nature of the community we hope to be?
- What is the role of educators in children's learning?
- What do we want children to learn?
- What sort of teaching and learning will best serve what we believe to be the purpose of education?

Vision is a declaration of what we care about and who we strive to be. It is our statement about the purpose of education, our answer to the questions about what kind of people we want to be and what kind of world we want to live in. Vision is an expression of potential: we look beyond what is to what could be.

Consider the various meanings of the word vision. It connotes "sight," as in "20-20 vision." It suggests something that appears in a dream or trance, a revelation. Some cultures embrace the practice of vision quest, a journey away from the everyday to discover one's life direction and spiritual calling. Taken together, these meanings of vision speak of discovery, of dreaming one's way into clear seeing and into a direction revealed.

How practiced are we at dreaming? We're often mired in the mundane and logistical; we don't linger much in the arena of dreams. We sometimes talk about longings, about needs unfilled that we badly want filled—enough money to pay staff what they deserve, or new playground equipment to replace the splintering wooden climber. But those aren't dreams; those aren't visions that set

our direction, that speak to who we want to be and how we want to live. They're solid practical desires, helpful when fulfilled, perhaps even transformative—but they're grounded in the immediate and tangible, more linked to systems and structures than to dreams.

To dream is to aspire, conceive, imagine. It's derived from the Old English word meaning "to rejoice, to play music." We sometimes braid the idea of "hope" into the notion of "dream"—hope, which shares its etymology with the word "hop," meaning "leaping in expectation," cherishing a desire with anticipation.

When did you last dream in a way that had you leaping in expectation? That had you joyfully making music, so delighted were you with what you had imagined?

We can define *vision* as the fullness of dreaming with hope. Full-bodied and generative, drawing on and fueling inspiration, *vision* offers a picture of what we want to create. *Vision* integrates imagination, passion, and delighted anticipation of the possible. *Vision* sets our course.

Vision is distinct from mission. Mission is a statement of services, it's what we do. Vision is our most actualized way of being in the world; it grows beyond how things are to describe how we would like them to be. It's the expression of a community's purpose, its aim and intention.

Pedagogical leaders committed to creating a culture of inquiry carry a vision of a community that learns, characterized by lively questioning and experimentation, and inhabited by thinkers committed to meaningful engagement with each other and with substantive ideas. We dream towards coming together as people who are as human as we can be, curious and inventive, patient and humble. And we live into our dream with hope and muscle, finding our way forward through our values as we create systems that sustain and amplify our vision.

Peter Block, an organizational consultant, writes that, "The most compelling dialogue we can have is about our vision. Leadership is keeping others focused on the vision, and this means that we have to get comfortable talking about it."¹ Pedagogical leaders keep others in the community focused on vision, and keep vision at the heart of the dialogue about the community's practices and pursuits.

How Will We Live into Our Vision? Finding Direction from Values

Our values animate our vision. Values are the principles and beliefs that guide our decision-making about how we'll realize our vision—how we'll understand and enact relationships; how we'll address social justice and ecological concerns; how we'll construct curriculum and design our physical space and allocate money and time. Values embody what we stand for, they reflect our ideals, and, so, they provide the basis for decisions and direction.

I spent some time poking around on the web to read how people write about values. Several websites, focused on ethics in the workplace, listed an array of values that an organization might adopt. Look at this quite varied list: ambition, competency, individuality, equality, service, responsibility, accuracy, dedication, diversity, improvement, enjoyment, loyalty, credibility, honesty, teamwork, accountability, empowerment, efficiency, dignity, collaboration, stewardship, accomplishment, courage, independence, security, compassion, friendliness, discipline, generosity, persistence, optimism, dependability, flexibility.

As I read this list, I had an immediate visceral response to each of these words—"yes, yes!" or "no way." Values are deep-rooted and carry potent imagery and resonance. They grow from our vision of who we want to be, and speak to how we aim to become who we envision. Articulated, our vision begins to breathe us alive. We can deliberately call forward the particular values that will carry us towards our vision and consciously consult them as we chart our course.

A fair amount of daily practice in early childhood programs is inherited: circle time, for example, and naptime customs, and activities centered on holidays and seasons. We do what we do because that's what has always been done. These proceedings have become untethered from vision and values. Pedagogical leaders act as provocateurs, asking "Why?" We interrogate inherited practices, asking if the values that they express are, indeed, the values that our community wants to embody.

Pedagogical leaders wake a community into conscious conversations about the values we hold at the center of our shared life as the expression of who we strive to be. Our shared values, in turn, help us develop the practices, policies, and organizational structures that determine the shape of our days together.

How Will We Express Ourselves? Crafting Organizational Systems

Alongside pedagogical practice, organizational systems embody and amplify vision and values: What specific organizational structures, practices, and policies will allow us to become the program we want to be? What systems will hold our program accountable to our commitments about the purpose of education?

When we talk about systems, we mean what we'll do, concretely, to become the program we aspire to be. Systems means behavior, guided by values and vision. Systems means decisions about how we distribute resources of time, money, and leadership.

- We strive to align organizational systems with our pedagogical vision and values, and seek to put systems in place that weave together our classroom, administrative, and family practices. In this way, we create a unified and unifying expression of community identity.

The role of pedagogical leaders is to ask questions aimed at lining up organizational systems in this way, questions like:

- How will we structure our welcome and orientation for new staff, so that it parallels how we hope educators welcome and orient new children and their families?
- How will we arrange our physical space so that there is room for educators to meet in reflection and study, and for families to come together to share stories and insights, and for children to give over to investigation, play, and contemplation?
- How will we plan the content of staff meetings and retreats and family gatherings, so that it parallels how we hope educators plan curriculum for children?

- How will we organize consistent and substantive planning time for educators, so that it parallels how we hope educators offer children meaningful time for reflection and meaning-making and how we hope educators and families come together for study and the shared construction of understanding?
- How will we structure staff evaluations, so that the process parallels how we hope educators invite children to reflect on their learning?
- What practices will we put in place to provide educators and families with opportunities to expand their leadership in our program and in the field of early education—practices that parallel the ways we hope educators invite children to stretch into new terrain and take on new roles?

The systems and practices that we have in place for educators, families, and children each contribute to answers to the question, “Who are we as a community?” When we align our systems with our values, those answers speak with congruency, illuminating organizational integrity, the wholeness that comes when *what we do* unfolds from *what we care about*, on all fronts. Our practices, then, become an expression of community identity, rather than simply a bunch of policies to follow.

Pedagogical leaders call a community into integrity by holding the community's values as the measure for decisions about systems, policies, practices. They ensure that organizational conversations are anchored by consideration of the community's values, offering those values as touchstones for decision-making and course-setting. In this way, pedagogical leaders help a community grow into an always more integrated expression of their vision for who they are.

A Systems Example: Structures for Welcoming

Consider this cornerstone question: How will we structure our welcome and orientation for new staff, so that it parallels how we hope educators welcome and orient new children and their families?

It's tempting to hand piles of paperwork to new staff members, full of details about staff schedules and break times, how payroll is managed, how leave requests and sick days are handled, copies of lesson plan forms and expectations for record-keeping. After handing over this paperwork, we could show new staff members where the bathrooms and the break room are, where they can drop their coats and bags, and then send them off to work.

We would cringe—and rightly so—if that was how educators greeted children and families as they began their time in our program.

What if, in our first exchanges with new staff members, we welcomed “the self that teaches?” What if we invited conversations about what we hope our center stands for—the values and vision that anchor our community? What if we made time for thoughtful observation and those vulnerable first steps into relationship—just as we would for a child as she joins our center? ...

My first day as an educator at Hilltop Children's Center was full of paperwork—but with no time to read it, only to sign the necessary legal forms—and a tour of the building, a quick introduction to the educator with whom I'd be working, and then I was on duty.

This was our typical welcome to new staff for many years. We had a change in leadership, though, and that change set us on a trajectory for change. The director, who served in the role as pedagogical leader, challenged us to re-make our orientation process, streamlining the orientation to employment logistics and developing a new orientation to values, vision, and pedagogy. She called out our commitment to be a community of people who feel deeply, dream boldly, and who bear generous and kind witness to each other as thinkers, innovators, seekers, and players. “Nowhere in that vision does it say we're a community of people who fill out paperwork efficiently,” she said. “Our vision is all about relationship and reflection, self-awareness and collaboration. What values will help us actualize that vision in our orientation process?”

Through a series of conversations facilitated by our pedagogical leader, we named what we'd longed for ourselves, when we'd each joined the staff. And we called forward core aspects of our collegial relationships, elements of our work together that we hoped

would be seeded during a new staff member's first days. Through that process, we articulated the values that would guide us as we created a new orientation process:

- *We value protected time for planting the seeds of relationship and connection.*
- *We value the reflective practice of observation and discussion.*
- *We value the discipline of study and writing.*
- *We value the generosity of collegiality.*

From those values, we constructed a new welcome and orientation system. We arranged a paid three-day period for a new staff member to come to know our community before she or he had any responsibilities with children. During that time, a new educator spent time in guided observation of a range of classrooms; working with the pedagogical leader, she explored the meaning of her observations. A new educator moved through an orientation handbook that addressed our core values and vision with observation practices, readings, and questions for study. She also met for the first time with her peer mentor, a long-time staff member who would be her informal partner during her first year on staff, an ally she could turn to with her questions, musings, discoveries, and uncertainties.

We continually revisited this welcome and orientation process, as we learned from new staff what worked well about it and what left them overwhelmed or confused or at loose ends. Our overarching intention, called forward by our pedagogical leader, was to engage educators as we hope they engage children and families, with a warm and thoughtful welcome into a rich and lively community.

Integrating Vision, Values, and Systems

When we make systems-focused decisions based on values that express our vision, we stay tuned to the pedagogical process of teaching and learning rather than to regulations and assessment. We create an integrated and integrating culture of inquiry in which curiosity and conversation, research and reflection, saturate our days and seep into all aspects of our program.

Here's a glimpse into how we approached this integrating practice at Hilltop over several years. We began by working together to craft a vision statement that articulated our aims and intention. From there, we called forward the values that would help us live into our vision. Finally, we set out the practices that we would take up to express our values. We began with this overarching vision statement describing the community we wanted to be ...

Hilltop Children's Center: A Learning Community for Children and Adults

Where children are valued for their ability to do meaningful work, their wonder and curiosity, their perspectives, and their ability to play—

Where families are valued for their bonds and traditions, their ability to play, their commitment to work, home, and community, and their dreams for their children—

Where staff are valued for their vision, their delight in children, their skill, heart, and knowledge, their commitment to families, and their ability to play—

We cherish what we learn from each other.

From that beginning, over the course of several years, we amplified that vision statement into its component elements: our vision, our values, and our practices for each group in our community—children, families, educators ...

Our Vision for Children

We regard children as compassionate and generous friends, reflective thinkers, thoughtful solvers of problems, breathtakingly alive in their bodies, and skillful

collaborators. We seek to honor those qualities in them, nurturing their developing understandings of themselves in relationship with others. We want children to honor their feelings and ideas, to be reflective and self-aware, and to explore many perspectives. We invite children to see themselves as members of a community and to take responsibility for the shape of that community. We encourage children to notice and speak out about unfairness and to act to change it.

Values at the heart of our program for children

We value questions and the process of investigating them, more than arriving at answers.

We value complexity, not-knowing, uncertainty, divergent and contradictory ideas.

We value the process of constructing knowledge and understanding through collective experimentation, dialogue, and study.

We value the influence of the classroom environment, the thoughtful use of time, and the intentional organization of routines on children's play and relationships.

We value the role of imagination and intuition, of spirit and heart, as surely as we value intellect.

Practices that express our values

The values we hold for children's experiences at Hilltop are reflected in the day's flow and emphasis. We want children's time here to be characterized by:

- *long stretches of uninterrupted time, in which children's questions, understandings, emotions, relationships, and explorations serve as the foundation for our curriculum;*
- *many opportunities and substantial adult support for children to form relationships with each other, creating a community shaped by playfulness, inquiry, and affection in which conflicts are seen as opportunities to strengthen connection and in which collaboration is a core practice;*

- *opportunities for children to use many media to represent and revisit their theories, experiences, and feelings, and to communicate those ideas, experiences, and feelings to others;*
- *encouragement for children to inhabit their bodies' sensuality and muscle, perceptivity and movement, balance, stillness, and speed; time, space, and supplies for children to transform materials, making, shaping, taking apart, recreating; and*
- *adults moving with respect and quiet gentleness in the classroom, acknowledging with our voices, our movements, and our demeanor that the rooms are the children's work spaces, dreaming spaces, feeling spaces, living spaces, and that we are there to listen and to support and to listen some more.*

Our Vision for Families

We want Hilltop to be a vital, vibrant community, characterized by rich relationships and thoughtful dialogue. We aim to create an environment that reflects and honors children's families, building bridges between home and Hilltop that allow children to move easily and fluidly between these two central arenas of their lives. We understand families to be:

- *eager to understand, grow, discover, and investigate;*
- *curious to discover both the power and fragility of their children; powerful in their bonds with their children; competent to reflect on and rethink their experiences; and*
- *able to consider their own children and all children.*

We offer ourselves as resources for families about child growth and learning, and see families as resources for educators about their children's cultural contexts, passions, and developmental journeys. We recognize that families balance work and home, and seek to support them in their efforts to hold those substantial responsibilities.

Values at the heart of our program for families

We value families' devotion to ensuring their children's safety and well-being, to knowing, in particular and intimate detail, about their children's moment-to-moment lives, and to playing a primary role in each unfolding day and each wakeful night.

We value the trust that families place in us, as they share their children's lives with us.

We value shared decision-making, educators and families together shaping the daily life and the curriculum of the classroom.

We value mutual intimacy, in which educators and families offer themselves to each other as full human beings, not locked into the confining roles of "parent" and "teacher."

Practices that express our values

Central in our classrooms are tangible markers of home: framed family photos, photo albums, tea cups made by parents for children, treasure boxes in which families leave surprises for their children, nap pillows decorated by families for their children.

We share stories of children's play and work at Hilltop in journals that travel between home and Hilltop. We invite families to add to their children's journals, responding to what we've written and writing their own entries.

We create space in our classrooms for families to linger, providing adult-sized seating in couches and comfortable chairs where they can snuggle with their children, read their children's journals, and chat with each other.

We hold frequent gatherings for children, families, and educators: monthly community sing-alongs, informal social gatherings on weekends and evenings, occasional educational forums for families, community rituals marking passages like birth and death, and celebrations like tea parties for no particular reason, just because it's a joy to come together.

We meet with families in small groups for collaborative conferences to study traces of children's pursuits in order to understand children's thinking and questioning, and to plan our next offerings to children.

Our Vision for Educators

We want educators at Hilltop to be on fire about their work; to feel competent, excited, curious, and profoundly attentive to the children. We strive to be a program in which educators move between theory and practice, with a solid understanding of the thinking underneath our teaching practices and with lively teaching practices that set each classroom alight. We commit to knowing the children intimately, and to living alongside them in ways that communicate our affection, delight, and regard.

Values at the heart of our program for educators

We value attentiveness to, curiosity about, and delight in children's play.

We value self-awareness about the ways in which our beliefs and cultural perspectives shape what we notice and don't notice.

We value relationships anchored in glad witnessing, authentic exchange, and curiosity about others' perspectives.

We value the practice of teacher research, and the experience of collaborative study, meaning-making, and planning.

We value the contributions of child development knowledge and early learning theories to our learning, as well as the insights offered by poetry and literature, the physical arts, and the arenas of science, ecology, and technology.

Practices that express our values

We emphasize teaching practices grounded in the pedagogical cycle of observation, study, and planning. We gather observation notes and collect photos and work samples of children's pursuits, and come together regularly with colleagues and families to

explore children's perspectives. We plan offerings to children intended to support and extend their intellectual, emotional, and social pursuits.

We meet in teaching teams for weekly study and learning, and monthly as a full staff. Our pedagogical leader crafts a year-long focus for our professional learning related to the central tenets of our pedagogical practice.

We create visual and written documentation that analyzes the meaning of children's play and that tells the story of our thinking about children's thinking.

We invite educators into leadership roles in our programs, facilitating visits by professionals to Hilltop, leading orientation workshops for new staff, partnering with new staff as mentors, and writing for publication.

The process of weaving together our vision, values, and practices called us into integrity. It helped us steer a course through the shoals of compliance and assessment by keeping us focused on the core questions: Who are we as a community? How will we live into our vision? How will we express ourselves?

We didn't write this statement all at once. It grew out of several years of conversation, exploration and provocation, as we wrestled our way to shared commitments for our work, aiming always to ensure that *what we did* reflected *what we valued*. And it continues to evolve; the staff revisit it regularly, considering what continues to be resonant and what's changing, so that it both reflects and shapes the on-going growth of the center.

In this, as in other formative processes, the pedagogical leader keeps the dynamics of vision, values, and practice in continual motion. When there's a decision to make, the pedagogical leader anchors the discussion in consideration of vision and values, asking questions like "How will this decision amplify or disrupt our vision?" The pedagogical leader notices when habit creeps into practice or when regulations become the measure for action, and sounds the call to revisit and refresh the braiding of vision, values, and systems.



Dreaming and Vision Building for Professional Learning

The principle that this chapter offers for pedagogical leadership captivates me like the song of a rare bird. So different from how typical administrators or coaches see and describe their work! Lingering on each paragraph of Ann's writing, I noted phrases that could serve as a playlist we might write the music for, composing a new approach to leadership and professional learning:

- Our vision is the fullness of our dreaming with hope;
- Carrying a vision of a community that learns;
- Waking a community into conscious conversations;
- How will we become ourselves?
- How will we express ourselves?
- Structures determine the shape of our days;
- Systems embody and amplify our values and vision;
- Systems mean decisions about how we allocate our resources of time, money, and leadership.

Ann describes a shift that happened in the culture of her child care center when the director began to see herself as a pedagogical leader, beyond the notion of a manager or supervisor. That in and of itself may be new thinking and terminology for a director struggling to stay afloat every day. In our book *The Visionary Director*, Deb Curtis and I tried to offer administrators a framework for conceptualizing this possibility for themselves.² Working with directors, we found ways to guide the process of clarifying values and collaboratively developing a vision statement. We also discovered that without structures and systems to help programs live into their dreams, even the most eloquent vision statement won't grow legs. Time and time again we saw teachers and administrators stall out, burn out, or become cynical about efforts to make significant changes. We came to understand a reversed wording of the principle Ann offers—vision and

values must be anchored in organizational systems. Both wordings are trying to sustain the practice of dreaming with hope.

Across town from Hilltop Children's Center, I watched another director, Luz Casio, invent her way into pedagogical leadership, as she shaped her vision of a community that learns at her early childhood center, the Refugee and Immigrant Family Center (RIFC), a program that served a population very different from that at Hilltop. This community primarily spoke Spanish as their first language, and was made up of newly-arrived immigrants and second- and third-generation immigrant families. Their aspirations were to raise their community out of the troubles of poverty, secure their cultural values and language in a happy future for their children, and make a meaningful contribution to their adopted country. Honoring the identity of this community, Luz, the center director, cultivated a program culture focused on these organizational values:

Social Justice: We value cultural democracy, overcoming bias, and undoing racism, and we believe that children and adults can only thrive in a world where inequities are noticed and actively challenged.

Collaborative Relationships: We value mutual respect, reciprocity, and collaborative decision-making among children, families, staff, and educators, and we believe that this builds strong and equitable communities.

Intentional Practice: We value pride in our work, innovation, and going beyond conventional ideas of quality experiences for children, and we believe this creates a sustainable quality of life for ourselves and generations to come.

Joyful Work: We value playfulness, purpose, and passion in the classroom as well as in the office, and we believe that adults can draw inspiration from children's lively minds.

Watching Luz at work brings to life Ann's phrase about waking a community into conscious conversations about values. Despite the pressures of accountability to different bureaucratic funding streams, Luz focuses her educators on living

into their values, not limiting their thinking to compliance with regulations. She hands out lists of tasks related to their accountability, asking, "How will you organize getting these done for yourself so that they don't get in the way of the real focus of your work here? We have systems that might help, examples others have used, but these are only possible ways. Who might need a mentor and who could offer mentoring leadership? Let me know if you need some time off the floor for this."

Staff meetings at Luz's center take up Ann's questions, "How will we become ourselves? How will we express ourselves?" Luz asks educators to bring photos of children's pursuits that make them curious; she guides the educators in puzzling out their questions about and enchantments with the children's play, and invites them to identify their own childhood memories related to the play. Often, a staff member's baby attends the meeting, nursing for a time with his mama and then enjoying the arms and laps of other educators while his mama guides discussion of an assigned book chapter. The reading may be in English, but the lively conversation is primarily in Spanish, and Luz prompts educators to consider the text in light of their own observations and experience. These are educators becoming confident in themselves and trusting in their right to question what seems culturally off-putting about strategies or theories in their reading. Isn't this an expression of what Ann suggests?

As pedagogical leaders, we carry a vision of a community that learns, characterized by lively questioning and experimentation, and inhabited by thinkers committed to meaningful engagement with each other and with substantive ideas. We dream towards coming together as people who are as human as we can be, curious and inventive, patient and humble. And we live into our dream with hope and muscle, finding our way forward through our values as we create systems that sustain and amplify our vision.

You can read more about Luz's approach to pedagogical leadership and the outcomes she describes for children, families, and teachers in my *Exchange* interview with her.³ For now, consider these questions for yourself:

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What has your heart singing and dreaming with new hope for your work?

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What muscles do you want to develop toward bringing that to life?

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.....

What process could you put in place to ensure each decision you make amplifies, rather than diminishes your vision?

.....