

## FOREWORD

My own professional journey has been unorthodox. As a teenager and college student, I vowed I would never be a teacher. I wasn't certain what I *did* want to do with my life, but spoke vigorously about what I *wouldn't* do. A German and English double major landed me in a publishing job at a university press where both the content and people I interacted with seemed to come from a planet different from my own. I got my first job as a public school teacher from the "want-ads" in a small newspaper in October. I left my office to go to lunch and simply couldn't fathom going back to that work over the long haul. Ironically, my publishing job was such a poor fit for me that I had no qualms – at least not initially – about trading it for the work I had vehemently declared I'd never do.

My first teaching job was in a very small, very rural school in the South during the first year of racial integration in the school district where I was hired. Conditions in the school were predictably difficult. I had no idea what it meant to teach in general, and certainly not what it meant to teach World History to teenagers, many of whom didn't know the name of the country they lived in. For most of that year, I was simultaneously confused and enlightened, challenged and fulfilled, desperate and at peace. From the beginning, I was smitten by the profession I'd rejected out of hand.

Several years into my two decades of K-12 teaching, I went back to school to get a master's degree in reading while I continued to teach. Many of my middle school students read at a primitive level and I needed to know how to help them. That degree program was meaningful to me because I could transport a good bit of it back into the classroom where I taught and integrated it into the lives of the students I taught. When I completed the degree, my professors encouraged me to stay on for doctoral studies and that seemed reasonable. I'd continue to teach, which was by then, at the core of my identity, and I'd continue to learn more about my craft.

There was an observable shift from masters to doctoral fare. Often I puzzled over why researchers wrote in a sort of foreign language that seemed designed to restrict their ideas to a limited tribe of individuals who spoke that language. For several semesters, I left a doctoral seminar with the sense that we had spent three hours discussing a grain of sand on an

immense educational beach – and that I had to return to the beach the next day where deep knowledge about a single grain of sand was more a frustration than a benefit. The grain of sand was interesting in its own way, but I was a beachcomber – in love with the messiness of the relentless water and abrasive sand.

And so, I was surprised to find myself seriously considering an opportunity to join a university faculty two decades into my career as a public school teacher. Truth be told, I'd never have entertained the idea except that our school district was in the throes of a troubling crisis of leadership that looked to be long term, and my role at the university was largely to direct and teach in a master's program for practicing teachers which seemed suitably close to the "real world" as I defined it. In time, that role morphed so that I worked also with doctoral students, served on a research team, and ultimately even became a department chair.

Through all the time – another 20 years and counting – I've struggled with a second vow I made. This time, the promise I made to myself as I began a second life as a professor was that I would never lose contact with the K-12 classroom, that I would always remember the beach and do work that reflected the lives and concerns of the "beachcombers" I left behind. I've tried daily to honor that pledge, as do some of my university colleagues.

Nonetheless, the university can make it hard to keep the pledge. Scholarly publications are valued far more than practitioner-oriented ones. The language of the small tribe of scholars begins to sound familiar, then normal, then preferable. Grants are important in the university reward system, but more to the point, are seen as necessary to fund research in schools. Yet the grants are often of a duration too short to make meaningful change in schools and tend to channel the agenda of the scholar and/or funding agency rather than of the classroom teacher.

While well-intended, the system can give credence to the concept of an ivory tower, a place seen by those on the outside as isolationist, escapist, impractical, remote from worldly concerns – perhaps even a place where tenants would rather not be bothered with ordinary and unpleasant details from the lives of "those other neighborhoods."

I'm taken, then, by publications like this one that focus on bridge-building, that reflect a well-defined intent to meaningfully link the university with the community in which it exists. In this book, people write about a need to re-vision learning as a collaborative, interdependent, relationship-based, and requiring mutually respectful effort among multiple members of the community-at-large. They emphasize equivalence among all members

(leaders and followers alike) of university-school-community partnerships. The goal of the partnerships is betterment of schools and communities, not simply or predominately data leading to publication.

The work seeks to balance theory and practicality. It extends the boundaries of learning in ways that seem particularly relevant to today's society and the nature of its students. It is not silent on the challenges implicit in such work, but it is nonetheless hopeful about taking mutual and sustained action, learning together from the action, and benefits of the action. Perhaps most hopeful is the idea that such work shapes the identity of leaders and followers alike in ways that linger when the work ends.

I like a line from the editors' introduction that casts the work reflected in this volume as "envision(ing) what is possible in an educational landscape often bereft of innovation and challenge to existing norms." I hope the models described here are catalysts for other challenges to existing norms and other examples of shared ownership of needs that exist in the communities which belong to all of its members and that need the best thinking of all its members to seek and test solutions.

Carol Ann Tomlinson, Ed.D.  
William Clay Parrish, Jr. Professor & Chair  
Educational Leadership, Foundations, & Policy  
Curry School of Education  
University of Virginia