

Carol Ann Tomlinson

Kay Brimijoin | Lane Narvaez



The Differentiated

School

Making Revolutionary Changes in Teaching and Learning

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of Conway Elementary School in Ladue School District,
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what teaching can be and for modeling
professionalism at every turn.
You make us proud to call ourselves teachers.*

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Acknowledgments

When we began to discuss the idea of this book, our intent was to tell the story of Conway Elementary School’s remarkable change journey to illustrate the way in which a faculty can transform itself to teach with the needs of each individual student in mind. Along the way, we learned about—and ultimately also studied—Colchester High School, which was similarly engaged in a transformation for more academically responsive teaching.

We entered the lengthy and demanding process of authoring a book with our eyes open and with a pretty good sense of how that process intrudes on an author’s life. By contrast, Joyce Stone, Bill Rich, and Brad Blanchette at Colchester High were conscripted into the writing process. They first gave us access to the school, faculty, and students. Then they answered thorny questions and picky ones. They sat for interviews. Then they pulled together documents at our request. Then they generated copy for us. That cycle repeated numerous times over many months through school years, holidays, and vacations until the book became the story of two schools that are unlike in many ways—and alike in all the really important ways. The book has a wider reach because of the addition of the Colchester story. That story would not have come to life without them.

And so, we offer enduring gratitude and respect to Joyce Stone, Bill Rich, and Brad Blanchette, who invested sacrificially in helping us with

this work while they continued to exemplify the best in educational leadership with their colleagues and for their students.

Introduction

Education, like all other professions, has a literature of best practice—a collective wisdom born of research and experience—that points the way to success. It’s not a formula, of course. There is no recipe that guarantees infallibility. Humans are varied, messy in their wants and needs. Young humans are certainly no less so. There is no error-proof way to teach them.

Nonetheless, we know a great deal about teaching and learning. Research and practice have clarified, and continue to clarify, pedagogical principles and procedures that merit careful attention and application. In short, we generally know what more effective classrooms look like in comparison to less effective ones. We also recognize that it is devilishly difficult to move from the latter to the former.

The metaphor of adopting a healthy lifestyle works as a proxy for adopting a best-practice classroom. Most of us know intellectually that good health is fundamental to a robust life. Most of us also know principles and practices that enhance health. Certainly some grey areas and unanswered questions remain, but some habits we know we should cultivate: sleep enough, eat more fruits and vegetables, exercise, stay out of direct sun, eliminate smoking, and so on. We have plenty of research and experiential evidence to commend those practices—and most of us mean to incorporate them into our lives. Evidence and intentions

notwithstanding, however, it's perversely difficult for most of us to live healthy.

Junk food tastes good. It requires more thought to cook for health. It's tough to add 30 minutes of exercise to a schedule that's already on overload. A tan is nice—and, in fact, makes us look fit. Besides, we've lived with our foibles to this point, and we're still in pretty good shape. There are other folks who are a lot less fit than we are. Maybe when summer comes and there are fewer pressures, we'll be more attentive to a healthy regimen.

Many of us never get much further than worthy intentions to adopt practices that stand a high likelihood of improving our health. Even if the intentions are vivid in our thinking, it is a considerable journey from *meaning* to do better to *doing* better.

Sure, most of us make forays into a healthier life. We buy a health club membership—and go for a while. We go on a diet—until we are overcome by the desire for a hamburger and a shake. We use sunscreen—until it feels sticky or until we run out.

Few of us convert from comfortable and familiar habits to practices that seem as though they will forever define someone else but not us. The point is that change is aversive when it calls on us to reinvent ourselves—to shed the cocoon of the customary—even when we really know we would benefit significantly.

So what's the solution? Should health-related practitioners quit championing the cause of a healthy lifestyle? Should they simply give up on research and exhortations?

To do so would, we think, be unethical. The practitioners have information we need to know. They also have evidence that when folks follow their advice, the outcomes are worth the effort. So they have no option but to continue learning; to make their advice clearer, more palatable, or more compelling; and to provide better support for the change they commend.

So it is with educational leaders—whether those leaders are teachers, principals, researchers, curriculum coordinators, staff developers, or specialists. By assignment or conviction, they have information about what constitutes “healthier” educational practice. They too have little choice but to continue learning; make their advice clearer, more palatable, or more compelling; and provide better support for the change they commend.

The goal of this book is to help educational leaders more effectively support changes regarding effective classrooms for academically diverse

student populations—in other words, for differentiated instruction. Most of us are keenly aware of the range of learning needs represented in our students. Most of us know we miss the mark with too many students in our classrooms. (If we miss the mark with even one student, that’s too many.) Yet most of us persist with one-size-fits-all teaching.

It’s so hard to change the familiar classroom patterns. Anyhow, mostly we’re good teachers. There are lots of classrooms less effective than ours. And the pressures are so great—standardized tests, too little time, too many students, parental expectations. It might make intellectual sense to pay attention to varied learning needs in the midst of all that, but in reality, that kind of teaching belongs to someone else. It’s just not for me. Or at least not now . . . Maybe when things let up a little . . .

How does a leader promote change when the prevailing winds all seem to blow against it? Again, there is no formula, but there is a body of knowledge about school and classroom change. We know things that are more likely to work in favor of change and things that are more likely to impede change. A leader armed with that body of best-practice knowledge is in a better position than an equally well-intentioned leader who repeats the familiar, comfortable—and often ineffective—patterns viewed as leadership.

To support leaders who, in turn, want to support development of more classrooms that work better for more students, this book will take a three-pronged approach. It will clarify the goals and attributes of best-practice differentiation. It will highlight important principles of best-practice approaches to change. It will provide illustrations from schools and leaders who understand both differentiation and school change—and who have been effective in moving from comfortable and familiar ways of teaching to ways of teaching that support the academic health of a far wider sphere of learners.

To that end, Carol Tomlinson has drawn heavily on the work and reflective writing of Lane Narvaez, principal of Conway Elementary School, and Kay Brimijoin, faculty member at Sweet Briar College in Virginia and staff developer at Conway for more than six years, as well as on observations at the school and conversations with many of its staff. She has also drawn generously from the work and reflective writing of Joyce Stone, principal of Colchester High School; Bill Rich and Brad Blanchette, Colchester faculty members; observations and interviews at Colchester; and research data gathered by Cindy Strickland and Kristina Doubet, University of Virginia doctoral students at the time they spent two years researching the Colchester site.

The book is not about formulas or recipes. We and our key collaborators have a combined educational experience of nearly 150 years. If we ever had the illusion that there is a single right answer to successful teaching, we've long since abandoned it. What we do believe, however, is that the research-based body of educational knowledge matters, that we can learn from the experiences of others, and that it is possible to change schools and classrooms for the better if we do so from a solid understanding of why the change matters and how change happens.

For us, and for the other educators whose experiences we'll share in this book, the change journey has been both evolutionary and revolutionary, both frustrating and exhilarating, both depleting and renewing. In the end, it has been reconstructing in highly positive ways. We are not through learning, but we believe that what we have learned to this point is worth sharing. We hope you will think so as well.