This book is dedicated to every teacher who chooses to teach all students, not just those easiest to teach, and to all those teachers who take time out of their already very busy schedules to inform policy-makers about sound pedagogy so those policy-makers can make effective decisions regarding instruction and assessment in schools.
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My first year of teaching was the most puzzling, most compelling, most exciting, most disorienting year I had ever lived—or have yet lived, for that matter. Not only had I not planned to be a teacher, but I had declared loudly and with some frequency that teaching was the last job I wanted on the face of the earth.

That adolescent fervor was born of the year my mother (a lifelong teacher) and I spent in the same building. I was in sixth grade, shy, in a new town, too tall. My daily goal was to go unnoticed—unlikely for a girl who was taller than any boy in the class and who had hair long enough to sit on. In any case, there was no hope for anonymity, because my teachers were my mother’s friends and they told her stories that involved me. They weren’t tales of horror. Part of my plan to be anonymous was to be so compliant and good that I would never be on a teacher’s radar. They were just little snippets from a day, presented to my mom as offerings of friendship by her colleagues who knew that she would be happy to have a verbal snapshot of her only child.

At twelve, I couldn’t see the stories as acts of friendship. I felt spied upon, betrayed, and I would not become an adult who did that to kids. I would not, therefore, be a teacher. My mother was kind enough never to say, “I told you so.”

My first year of teaching would have involved steep learning curves under any circumstances, because I had steered clear of an education major and thus had no real knowledge of what teaching was like. At best, I was prepared to “play school”—to mimic what I thought my own teachers had done. And the setting of my first year in the classroom was not a best-case scenario.
I taught in the deep South during the first year of integration in a district so rural that it seemed to have been left off all maps. It seemed as though suspicion and disdain was in the air we breathed, and as though we were all lost in ways more consequential than geographically. Adults in the area earned a livelihood largely by being paid not to farm. Many of the kids I taught had never been on highways. I discovered on the first day I taught that many also did not know the name of the country in which we lived. They were high school students.

Had I landed in a classroom on another planet or in another century, I would not have felt more a foreigner or more displaced in time than when I first entered the lives of my students and a time period that caused me to question my own roots as a human being. That my students had little in the way of the opportunities that I had taken for granted was evident to me early on. What took longer was realizing how many factors in their lives conspired to ensure that they retained that status. School was high on the list of limiting factors.

These were kids, the veteran teachers in the school made clear, who couldn’t learn, wouldn’t learn, didn’t want to learn. They were largely regarded as no-hope kids and were too often taught accordingly.

There were a few teachers in the school, however, who seemed to feel differently about the kids. They saw promise where others saw a vacuum. Their classrooms were energy sources for the kids rather than energy sappers. And the students were different people in the two kinds of classrooms.

I gravitated to the positive teachers at first simply because they seemed to regard me as something more promising than a foreign body that had been thrust into a closed system. Later I stayed close to them because they taught me the most important lessons about teaching that I ever learned. These were teachers who looked at their work as a calling rather than a job. They not only believed but knew the kids they taught would learn. Most importantly, they never once in my hearing suggested that there was a problem with a student or with a student’s family when that student wasn’t learning according to design. They simply dug deeper into their personal and professional reservoirs to look for one more way they could explain an idea, draw a student into a discussion, or provide support for success. They were not sanctimonious. They laughed at the quirky (and sometimes simply bizarre) comments of kids—but they never laughed at the kids themselves. I did, however, see them cry with kids on occasion. To this day, those teachers are the teachers I aspire to be.

They taught me many things of value—both practical and philosophical. They taught me to find the teachers who are the learners in a building and to become their friend. They taught me to find the teachers who mean to make the classroom work for each kid and to find the teachers who are less afraid of making mistakes than of standing still.
Had I taught in a school where Rick Wormeli taught, I would have found him, become his friend, and been his student. I feel fortunate to have done the latter two—and sad not to have had the opportunity to share a school setting with him.

Rick’s work is not going to move the educator who has a ready supply of “yes, buts” (“I could do this, but there isn’t enough time,” “I could do this, but the kids aren’t responsive,” “I could do this, but the room is too small”). Rick’s work is for the teacher who wants solutions, who wants to grow.

For those teachers and administrators, Rick offers knowledge that comes from having been in a classroom for a long and rich career and from having studied the best of scholarship about teaching and learning. He anticipates the questions teachers will ask about differentiation and answers them directly and economically. He knows what it feels like to succeed with a student—and what it feels like to fail. He prefers the former and he has developed a boundless repertoire of strategies designed to be catalysts for student success and to diminish the opportunity for students to fail.

Rick knows that good teaching—and high-quality differentiation is really just good teaching—requires proactive planning. He knows that powerful teachers place students in the center stage of plans and see themselves not as lead actors in a play but as directors of student learning.

He knows that powerful teachers proactively plan for the success of every student, both when the teacher is presenting and when the student is making sense of knowledge, ideas, and skills. He knows that curriculum, assessment, and instruction are three interdependent sides of a teaching triangle.

Rick points out that differentiation is a derivative of informed assessment and an imperative for effective instruction of students with “special needs” and goes on to remind us that every student has special needs at some time (or many times) in a school day, a school year, and a school life. Differentiation is what we do if we intend to have every student understand what they are learning, why they are learning it, why they should care, and how it makes them more fully human.

Perhaps the most durable of Rick’s contributions to the teacher-learners among us is an affirmation of what psychologist Carol Dweck calls a growth mind-set. The subtext of Rick’s work is the statement, “Of course each student can succeed with important ideas and skills. Of course I can figure out how to make that happen. Of course that’s my aspiration. Of course I’m willing to do what’s necessary to make that happen.”

As my first colleagues taught me, that’s what it really means to be a teacher.

Carol Ann Tomlinson

Foreword
We are the summation of our lives’ experiences, and for me, the most transformational experiences have come in the company of insightful thinkers and doers. I hope I have sufficient brainpower to interpret their wisdom correctly and to advance their ideas compellingly as I weave them with my own.

Whether through their written works, in conversations with me and others, or by their modeling of exemplary teaching and compassionate living, the following individuals have cared enough about students, teachers, and society to share their thinking about teaching, assessment, and differentiated instruction with our profession: Carolyn Coil, Robert Marzano, David Sousa, Marilee Sprenger, Jim Grant, Char Forsten, Betty Hollas, Debbie Silver, Amy Benjamin, Sheryn Northey, Carolyn Chapman, Pat Wolfe, Robert Sylwester, Carol O’Connor, Diane Heacox, Tom Guskey, Ken O’Connor, Susan Brookhart, Susan Winebrenner, Kylene Beers, Linda Rief, William Bender, Deborah Blaz, Kay Burke, Gayle Gregory, Sandra Kaplan, Cindy Strickland, Rita King, Judy Dodge, Mel Levine, Rick Lavoie, Robin Fogarty, Gretchen Goodman, Donna Whyte, Gloria Fender, Kelly Gallagher, Alfred Tatum, Stephanie Harvey, Carol Glynn, Stephen McCarney, Jay McTighe, Grant Wiggins, Ruby Payne, William Purkey, Joseph Renzulli, Jerome Bruner, Spence Rogers, Paula Rutherford, Richard Strong, Harvey Silver, Matthew Perini, Linda Tilton, Cris Tovani, Thomas Armstrong, Bruce Campbell, Eric Jensen, Roger Taylor, Robert Sternberg, Barbara Strauch, Marcia Tate, Susan Nolen, Catherine Taylor, and Rick Stiggins. In addition, I am indebted to the faculties of Langley High School, Oakton High School, Freedom Hill Elementary School, Herndon Middle School, and Rachel Carson Middle School, all of which are in Fairfax.
County Public Schools in northern Virginia, one of the best districts in the world to learn the craft of teaching diverse populations. I am in their debt.

One contributor to the differentiated instruction world deserves special mention: Carol Ann Tomlinson. There are many voices out there talking about differentiation, but Carol is the pioneer who put differentiation on the map for most of us. She has not only showed us how vital differentiation is to our schools’ success, particularly as we teach the masses in a democratic society, but she also explains how to do it in practical yet eloquent terms. Her work is the catalyst for literally thousands of educators’ thinking around the globe. I can’t wait to see what she comes up with next. And besides all that, she’s a former middle school teacher, and that’s cool.

Readers have seen the names of Stenhouse Publishers’ staff members often in an author’s acknowledgments, and that’s because they are talented and helpful people. They deserve every accolade. I am very thankful for the advice of Philippa Stratton, Bill Varner, and Erin Trainer, and, in particular, Holly Holland, an author and the first editor of my columns for Middle Ground magazine as well as the editor of my first book, Meet Me in the Middle. She’s the one who put the idea in my head that I might have something to share, and it has changed my life. Thank you, Holly.

I am also grateful to Brenda Dyck, Chris Toy, Bill Ivey, John Norton, Cossondra George, Marsha Ratzel, Ellen Berg, and many others on the MiddleTalk email list and everyone on the Teacher Leader’s Network email list for setting high standards of thinking, compassion, and professionalism.

As always, I am most grateful to my family. My wife, Kelly, is both Mom and Dad when I travel to work with schools. While holding a full-time position in her company, she manages our household, including coordinating and driving our two children to multiple sports and music commitments. She’s an amazing person. My son, Ryan, and my daughter, Lynn, are both in high school now. With each passing year, I grow more and more excited to see the wonderful young adults they are becoming. Somehow Kelly and I have added two more thoughtful citizens to the planet who will one day become terrific parents for the next generation. I thank both Ryan and Lynn for every bout of laughter, every conversation about life, and every candid question about adults’ hypocrisy they ask. By answering their questions honestly, I confront my own complacency and, paraphrasing Charles DuBois, sacrifice what I am for what I could become.

Rick Wormeli
Herndon, VA
2007