

# Foreword

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## *What If . . .*

Lisa Westman is a deep thinker about classrooms, and a creative one. Her work is a catalyst for her readers (including this one) to think more deeply and more imaginatively about the work we do in the name of education. She causes us to ask, “What if . . .”

What if we began every school year, and every day in every school year, with the resolve to learn more about each student we teach? And what if we understood that knowledge to be the underpinning of everything else we seek to accomplish in our classrooms?

What if we accepted that a teacher building a positive and respectful relationship with each student was the precursor to their success as learners—and ours as teachers?

What if we could recall the profound joy and fulfillment a baby or a toddler or a child in the summer outdoors derives from learning? And what if we sought day after day, unit after unit, standard after standard to make our classrooms—no matter the age of our students—places where that joy and satisfaction are consistently palpable?

What if we understood that we can teach the important ideas and skills of the disciplines in a hundred different ways? And that students can learn them in a hundred different ways? And that knowledge is loose in the world and should never be circumscribed by lists of standards, texts, and pacing guides?

What if we understood that standards are ingredients for dinner and that real teaching requires us to make dinner with those standards, not serve them cold, singly, and in isolation from the flavors of our students’ lives and our own?

What if we were willing to suspend the notions that teacher-focused, batch processing is the best we can do in the 21st century for students whose entry points, cultures, interests, languages, and perspectives quite literally span the globe?

What if we realized that time is far more fluid than we perceive it to be, and that the flexibility of time is one of the teacher’s greatest tools for supporting the success of each learner who comes our way?

What if we saw assessment as mentoring student progress rather than judging it? What if we understood formative assessment to be as much an

indicator of how we are doing in our classrooms as it is of how a student is doing in our classroom?

What if we insisted on measuring and being accountable for the growth of each learner rather than focusing solely on a century-old system of letters and numbers that, by definition, will be a misfit for too many learners?

And what if we saw *all* our work as ensemble rather than solo? What if, in nearly all planning, decision making, and reflecting, we turned to our students and said, “How should we go about this? How would you like to show what you’re learning? How will we know what excellence looks like—for you, and for all of us? What really matters in this work, and what is window dressing? What went wrong yesterday, and how do we repair it? How are we doing as a community? What must each of us do to support the success of all of us?”

And most of all, what if we knew in our core that one of our greatest opportunities and obligations is to feed and teach from our own unique passions, ingenuity, and professional judgment?

This book presents these truths to us directly, clearly, and compellingly. It is rich with voices, illustrations, and classroom examples that model the ideas, mentor our growth, and make it more exciting to say, “Why not” than “Yes, but . . . .”

—Carol Ann Tomlinson, EdD

William Clay Parrish, Jr. Professor and Chair  
Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Policy  
Curry School of Education, University of Virginia