

# Preface

## *Connection: The Heart and Soul of Teaching and Learning*

### **RATIONALE**

The complexity of the teaching profession has grown tremendously. Teachers are being asked to serve a multitude of roles for kids including nurse, social worker, and life mentor. Couple this with the rigors of new standards, regulations, and requirements and the growing pressures to meet a success defined almost solely by test scores in math and reading, and it is easy to see the squeeze on our classroom teachers. Many now wonder about the sustainability of the profession without a revisioning of how teaching and learning take place.

Even with this pressure building, learning has flourished in some of our schools. As many classrooms have lost their drive to engage students with the best practices of education, some have found a way to resist the external pressures and build beautiful spaces of learning for kids. In these pockets of excellence, teachers have shown courage to continue to bring deep learning to the students they serve.

These stories of classroom success are often buried behind classroom doors and schoolhouse walls because to be public about these stories as an educator can mean being punished by supervisors for stepping out of line and not focusing on the demands of state and federal leaders and legislators. Telling these stories also means the potential scrutiny of the other teachers who have shown little courage and don't want to be exposed as mediocre. These are the teachers who are following the daily script, abandoning subjects like science, social

studies, and the arts to focus on the testable subjects, and who are managing the classroom in a way that coerces students into learning. These teachers apply great pressure on schools and potential innovation as they don't want to be seen as inferior by the dedicated teacher down the hall. Many of the teachers featured for their courage in the book have experienced these pressures, and they have all persevered in difficult situations and shown a deep conviction in overcoming many obstacles.

Many of the featured teachers, leaders, and programs are often an oasis in the learning desert for the kids whom they serve. Many teachers around them aren't pushing for excellence at the rate or intensity that they are. This doesn't mean that these most innovative of teachers are without friends and allies in their buildings, but they are often without soulmates in their mission and drive for excellence.

Our connected world and the opportunity to be a connected educator has started to alleviate this pressure for some teachers. By connecting to other like-minded educators around the country, they are finding solace in the fact that there are others who are handling the same pressures. These kindred spirits, emboldened by the energy of allies and education soulmates, continue to forge ahead. They are building the teaching and learning environment that they know brings energy and excitement to student learning. The stories in this book are full of hope about meeting the needs of the whole child. They are a canvas of courage that brings new color and texture to the overwhelming volume of conversations about test scores and data, and most important, they showcase the importance of the joy in learning.

## **PURPOSE**

This book, designed for all teachers and teacher leaders pursuing a deep learning model, focuses on connection and its power in learning. It provides energy, ideas, and a rationale for growing as a connected educator. Being connected means looking at a learning space in a very different way. It means seeing excellence in messiness because kids have an opportunity to fail forward. It means knowing the importance of flexibility so that kids have the opportunity to grow at the pace they need. The best-connected educators see excellence in asking great questions that engage kids in the purpose of

their learning. They are the type of teachers that all children need and all parents want. They deeply understand that the purpose of learning is to strengthen the individual, strengthen the classroom, and strengthen the community. They see ideas as gems worth polishing and big, hairy global issues as the place to start.

In these connected classrooms, there are educators and learners dedicated not only to the classroom, but to serving education in general by collaborating with classrooms around the planet. Connected classrooms are living ecosystems that need partners and support to make their dreams possible. When visitors enter these classrooms, they feel something different, and they often struggle to put the right words to the experience. What they are feeling is empathy, and what they are seeing is thinking and conversation at their highest levels. They are also experiencing a rhythm that feels like a dance. It is the complex dance of learning displayed with elegant simplicity.

It is amazing how many teachers around the world may know about the excellence in a connected classroom before the teacher next door or the principal in the building can recognize the same. Connected teachers are sharing their best stuff freely and openly. Transparency and openness allow like-minded classroom leaders to work together for excellence.

This book was written in the hope that it will shine a bright light on the power of connection in classrooms around the country and nudge all of its readers to lean toward the opportunities of deeper learning that surround connected learning.

## **ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK**

There is beauty buried in classrooms throughout the country, and this book provides such a small sample of the inspiring work that is happening everywhere. There are brushfires of connection everywhere, but in too many places, the oxygen is getting sucked out of the fire. Kids, our future leaders and agents of change, deserve classrooms and schools that are inspirational and where good is never good enough.

Each chapter of the book has a group of guiding essential questions. They allow the reader an opportunity to preview the concepts and

ideas that are explored in the chapter, and they serve as entry points to additional conversations around connected learning. The theory section in each chapter works through the major ideas and concepts with a focus on the big ideas. Readers also have the opportunity to explore a classroom connection written by connected educators who tell their stories of courage and connection that have deeply impacted them and the kids they serve. Each chapter concludes with a set of action steps and resources to propel the reader forward. Change and excellence ultimately come from the actions that follow the words.

Learning in the connected classroom spills into the hallways, outside of the building, and into the community. Learning like this can't be trapped. Learning like this allows us all, child and adult, to dream bigger, smile more, and achieve happiness. The hope is the reader can use these pages to grow, reflect, and be inspired by other connected educators.