

Carol Ann Tomlinson

The Iceberg Theory of Teaching

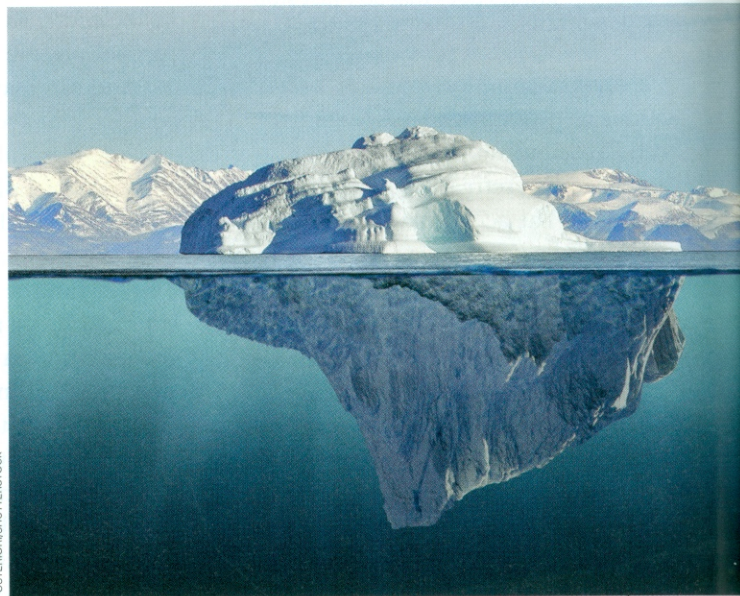
Educators must look below the surface to understand students' lives.

The first class in a course I teach at the university often begins with an analysis of several young characters from children's books and writing from children themselves. The authors of the children's books simply and artfully take us inside the lives and minds of school-aged children—an English language learner, a girl who already sees herself as an academic failure by 1st grade, a boy on the autism spectrum who only wants to be liked by the other kids, a girl shackled by a learning disability, a boy who is so full of ideas he can't stay still (and who makes his teacher a bit crazy), and another who struggles with the reality that his father is absent from his life. These characters make evident the often hidden struggles that confound the lives of the children we teach.

The writings of young people themselves can also reveal the complexity of their inner lives. You see the anguish of an intelligent little girl whose knowledge outpaces her peers and wishes that were OK. Or the confusion of a boy who is identified as emotionally disturbed because of the frustration he feels as a language learner in a class where not being fluent marginalizes him and makes him the target of bullies. We read the words of a teen who struggles with having to choose between school achievement and belonging to her peer group, a high school student who presents an outward facade of near perfection while realizing that she has lost her real voice in the process, or a teen who leaves a note, with no explanatory details, to tell her teacher not to worry if she doesn't come back to school. Many, if not most kids, come to us every day bearing great weight, and that burden bears with great force on learning.

Illustrations in Front of Us

If those examples seem distant, I recently talked with a parent who lives near Emancipation Park in Charlottesville, Virginia. She made an impromptu decision to take her children on a camping trip



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this past August to spare them the turmoil that was escalating in their hometown due to the planned march by white nationalists. But the family ended up leaving too late. The children had heard enough from their yard and saw examples of racial hatred as they rode through the area on their way out of town. The mother couldn't remove what they had seen, and she couldn't ignore the reality that one of their favorite teachers in their after-school program was seriously wounded in the violence that took place.

I also listened to a mom whose elementary school son, a good student, didn't want to get up on the first day of school. He said to her, with tears flowing, "This is the year my class has to take that test. What if I mess up on it?"

And I continue to reflect on a high school student who told her mom that she wished social media sites "weren't so competitive." Asked what that meant, the high school junior told her mom about a friend who was warned by a mutual acquaintance on a social media platform not to

sign up for a particular school activity because they were both applying to the same college. The girl who posted the warning planned to sign up for that activity too; if they were both doing the same extracurricular activities, she said, their college application letters would be too much alike. My friend's daughter was quiet for a minute and followed up by saying, "When it's time to look at colleges, Mom, I'd like to do a secret trip so no one knows where I'm applying." A heavy load for young folks to carry.

Below the Tip


Add to these common struggles the challenges that are imposed by escalating poverty, overburdened parents, homelessness, precarious immigration status, hunger, chronic illness, and whatever other struggles you know exist in your classroom. With that, the idea of what it means to teach well takes a seismic shift. A student in my

college course considered that reality as she wrote a response after hearing the excerpts about and from young people: "I really understand for the first time that if I think I'm preparing lessons for the faces in front of me, I'm making a costly mistake. My students live beneath the surface, and I have to do whatever I can to see beneath that surface so I am prepared to reach them where they live."

Her wording seems important to me. I'm a proponent of the "iceberg theory of teaching." What we see of students in the classroom is the bare tip of what's there—in terms of capacity, but also in terms of the complexities of their lives. If we accept that tip as reality and fail to acknowledge what's beneath the surface, we do so at the peril of our students—and at our own peril as professionals and human beings.

Teachers aren't mental health professionals. We can't be. But what we

can do, and I believe must do to really reach young people, is to work relentlessly to know them, and then to plan and teach with what we learn firmly in the foreground of our thinking.

There is a mental health problem in schools. It's in our classrooms every day. It's not possible for teachers to be neutral elements in that problem. We make a problem better. Or we make it worse. 

Carol Ann Tomlinson

(cat3y@virginia.edu) is William Clay Parrish Jr. Professor and Chair of Educational Leadership, Foundation, and Policy at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia in Charlottesville. She is the author of *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners* (2nd ed., ASCD, 2014) and, with Michael Murphy, *Leading for Differentiation: Growing Teachers Who Grow Kids* (ASCD, 2015).



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