

Increasing Rigor



Rigor is more than well-crafted lessons; it is the result of an environment where all students are expected and supported to demonstrate high levels of achievement.

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As educators increasingly focus on increasing the level of rigor in their schools, it is important to first agree on what rigor is. If you ask teachers in your building to define rigor, you will likely hear a variety of responses. The same is true in the research on rigor.

Many researchers note that rigor involves critical thinking and deep learning about a particular topic (Bogess, 2007; Wagner, 2008). Rigor has also been the responsibility of teachers to provide lessons that focus on real-world settings and expert knowledge (Strong, Silver, & Perrini, 2001; Washor & Mojkowki, 2006/2007).

Ultimately, rigor is more than just the content of the lesson or even what teachers expect students to do. Too often, teachers simply raise expectations without providing appropriate support for students to succeed. True rigor means creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels, each student is supported so that he or she can learn at high levels, and each student demonstrates learning at high levels (Blackburn, 2008). Only by creating a culture of high expectations and providing support so that students can truly succeed do you have a rigorous classroom.

Providing Support

Supporting students so that they can learn at high levels is central to the definition of rigor. It is essential that teachers craft lessons that move students toward challenging work while providing scaffolding to support them as they learn. To simply increase expectations without helping students achieve at higher levels is inappropriate. There are two specific ways teachers can help students succeed as they move to higher levels of learning: incorporate motivational elements and use engaging instructional strategies.

Incorporate Motivational Elements

Students are more intrinsically motivated when they value what they are doing and when they believe that they have a chance for success. For students, the key elements for being motivated are seeing value in a lesson and believing that they can be successful. Encouraging teachers to incorporate these two elements within each lesson will increase students' motivation.

Figure 1

Observation Tool

This observation tool can be used to gather data about student motivation and engagement.

Sample Observation Tool: Motivation and Student Engagement	
Motivational Aspects	
Examples of relevance and value	
Reinforcement of authentic success	
Student Engagement	
Type of Activity	Time or Percentage of Lesson
Teacher lecture/teacher talk during discussion	
Individual students' responses during lecture/discussion	
Students talking to one another (as partners or in small groups)	
Students involved in written response to learning (individual)	
Students involved in projects or creative responses to learning (as individuals, partners, or in small groups)	
Student-initiated questions or activities (on task)	
Other	

Source: Blackburn, B. [2008]. *Rigor is not a four-letter word*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.

Value. Rigor is directly connected to relevance. That is the value part of motivation. Students are more motivated to learn when they see the value, or the relevance, of learning. I've found that students have a radio station playing in their heads: WII-FM—What's in It for Me? During a lesson, students are processing every activity through that filter: What's in this for me? Why do I need to learn this? Will I ever use this again? When discussing the curriculum with your teachers, ask them, What is the relevance of this content for your students? How are you showing students the value of this material?

Success. Success is the second key to student motivation. Students need to achieve to build self-confidence, which is the foundation for a willingness to try something else. That in turn begins a cycle that results in higher levels of success. Success leads to success, and the achievements of small goals or tasks are building blocks to larger ones.

Building a culture that focuses on success begins with the principal. Celebrate success in a variety of ways. In addition to an honor roll for students who make As and Bs, create a Principal's Progress Award to give to any student who makes progress toward a set goal. Encourage teachers to track progress in addition to achievement so that students build confidence. Build a success mentality: that everyone can and will be successful in your school.

Use Engaging Strategies

Students are also more successful when they are authentically engaged in a lesson. To be engaged in learning boils down to whether students are involved and participating in the learning process. If students are actively listening to a discussion, possibly writing down things to help them remember key points, they're engaged. But if they're really thinking about the latest video game while nodding so that you think they're paying attention, they're not.

Consider a Slinky as a way to conceptualize this idea. For a Slinky to work, you have to use two hands to make it go back and forth. If you hold it in one hand, it just sits there doing nothing. It doesn't move correctly without both ends working. Similarly, if the teacher is the only one involved in the lesson, it isn't as effective. The foundation of instructional engagement is involvement by both the teacher and the student. As you work with teachers in your building, encourage higher levels of engagement.

Principals use a variety of tools to gather data about their teaching and learning. (See figure 1.) They may include walk-through protocols, samples of student work, or an instructional supervision model. Regardless of the strategy, it is important to have a system

for collecting data. Those data may then be used in discussions with teachers about their teaching.

Conclusion

In a rigorous learning environment, the role of the principal is to remove barriers to success. An effective principal must first understand the rationale for increased rigor and be an advocate for needed changes. Next, he or she should lead the conversation with a focus on learning, not punishment. Too often, efforts to increase rigor are focused on quantity, rather than quality. The principal has the opportunity to guide discussions about the differences between those two ideas.

Finally, for students to be successful, teachers must incorporate elements of motivation and engagement throughout their lessons. You can support this by prompting conversations about those elements; looking for them during observations or walk-throughs; and encouraging teachers to discuss how motivation, en-

agement, and rigor can increase the successful learning of all students. **PL**

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