



Harnessing the power of rigor and self-efficacy in the classroom

Current academic rigor can push even the most motivated students to exhaustion.

Providing students opportunities to discover their strengths allows them to cultivate the belief that they can succeed.

As leaders in schools, we understand that creating and sustaining caring, inclusive learning environments for all students is a high priority. Yet in these times of educational reform, and with the implementation of Common Core, we need to consistently and enthusiastically support our teachers in their endeavors within the classroom.

We know our teachers can experience exhaustion with the instructional challenges, and students are pushed to new limits. In fact, it is not uncommon to overhear a teacher share that, “it’s a task to keep them engaged” or “the new standards require a lot of focusing.”

These are just examples of the many comments we have heard on our campus, but they have an underlying message for us as leaders: We must understand how to help our communities embrace and utilize two critical concepts: rigor and self-efficacy.

The power of rigor

Rigor is powerful, but not always well-understood. According to author and learning consultant Barbara Blackburn, rigor is

creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels, each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels, and each student demonstrates learning at high levels. Blackburn reminds us that rigor is not about giving students more to do; it’s about giving students higher level tasks.

Clearly, rigor cannot truly occur without creating an environment where expectations are high for all students.

Rigor in the classroom does not happen without intentional effort and continual teacher reflection. Robert Marzano explains that for teachers to truly focus on supporting students in the area of rigor, 13 essential strategies must be addressed:

- identifying critical content;
- previewing new content;
- organizing students to interact with content;
- helping students process content;
- helping students elaborate on content;
- helping students record and represent

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knowledge;

- managing response rates with tiered questioning techniques;
- reviewing content;
- helping students practice skills, strategies and processes;
- helping students examine similarities and differences;
- helping students examine their reasoning;
- helping students revise knowledge; and
- helping students engage in cognitively complex tasks.

These essential strategies should be implemented at various times through the learning progression. It is important to emphatically note that a one-time shot does not ensure rigor.

Mastering self-efficacy

Another area that must be mastered is that of self-efficacy – not to be confused with self-esteem.

Stanford psychologist Albert Bandura describes self-efficacy as one's belief in his or her capabilities to exercise control over their own functioning and over events that affect their lives. This is quite a different concept than self-esteem, which refers to an individual's overall positive evaluation of the self.

In today's classroom setting, with high standards and expectations, promoting self-esteem and "feeling good" will not ensure that students can manage the rigor we demand. Rather, we must find ways to harness the power of self-efficacy, along with rigor.

Inside the classroom

Classroom learning communities that are caring and inclusive are key to providing rigorous, self-efficacious environments. Establishing a nurturing classroom community can provide students with space to develop specific capabilities and to experience a sense of inner balance and wholeness in a community with others (Easton, 1997).

Students' cultures, languages, socio-economic status and special needs may present unique challenges in the general education setting. For inclusive environments to be successful, teachers need to find a way to develop a learning community where the social and emotional learning of all students are

valued, nurtured and supported alongside their academic learning (Reicher, 2010).

In the classroom setting, rigor and self-efficacy must be harmoniously intertwined to ensure optimal levels of teaching and learning. Since the current academic rigor can push even the most motivated students to exhaustion, providing students opportunities to discover their strengths allows them to cultivate the belief that they can succeed.

In addition, fostering the self-efficacy of students individually, as well as the collective self-efficacy of the team, raises students to the status of independent learner.

Keeping rigor and self-efficacy alive in the classroom is key, especially when students come from various demographics and enrich our schools with tremendous diversity. English language learners, students with disabilities, students who are disadvantaged socio-economically, foster and homeless youth all deserve guaranteed access to Common Core. However, there are particular strategies that help ensure this access.

Opportunities for students

First, define everything for students. Having a birds-eye view of students as they are just beginning to discover who they are and where they fit in is key in student development. One must begin by building every students' sense of self-efficacy early on in the school year. Goals, tasks and accomplishments are boosted when students can identify their own strengths. Defining clear learning objectives and creating opportunities for students to perform tasks successfully strengthens them for the rigor.

An example of being explicit and defining everything would be to front load students with a lesson on "focus" before diving into a lesson on math. This is referred to as the "superhero focus." This is critical, because to encourage our students to focus and listen without offering them strategies to do so only leads to distraction and at times exhaustion.

Prepping students for whatever instructional lesson is about to occur is key – to offer students support, to create a superhero focus – and must be revisited, not simply a one-time reminder.

This superhero focus can include discussion and role playing in class. For example,

the classroom teacher might facilitate a discussion about the difference between focus during instruction and watching TV at home. Such conversation can help students realize they control their own actions. That sense of control builds upon their belief in themselves, and they will approach learning challenges with the goal of mastery and not the limitations.

Controlling the climate

Happy teacher and happy students go hand in hand. This equation can endure for an entire year when understood by all members of the learning community.

Each day, the teacher writes "Happy Teacher = Happy Students." The joke goes: "If the teacher isn't happy, no one's happy." It's a fun phrase that breaks the ice and keeps it light in a curriculum that can be daunting.

Since the phrase has been defined by the teacher, it also helps set the temperature gauge for them when it comes to class production and generally positive conduct. The teacher serves as the climate control when talking about the classroom, and yet the students are willing participants in maintaining a positive tone.

The new 'time out'

Time out has a new meaning, and is not how we have defined it in the past. Since students in the modern day classroom are expected to keep up with the rigor of academically demanding curriculum, breaks are needed, and we must redefine the concept of time out.

Clearly, all students, from the advanced to struggling learner, need support navigating these academic demands. Self-efficacy fosters students' stamina and increases the need to succeed in school.

Communicating and demonstrating to students that the teacher has genuine empathy for their academic plight is key to risk taking and progression. Hence there is a new time zone: work time and play time. When students understand the difference between the two, the rate of off-task behavior lessens and production increases. Students begin to own their learning and face the challenges of the Common Core.

Dream big together

A team approach is key to holding and achieving big dreams for success in the classroom environment. The academic rigor of Common Core is a real challenge for many students, and a team approach is critical.

To be a team, a community goal must be established so that there is buy-in from all stakeholders in the classroom. After all, when students feel a sense of collaborative spirit, then the rigor is easier to digest.

Within a collaborative learning environment students can push each other to set and achieve goals, challenge themselves and others, and help each other to see setbacks as a way to improve.

As we learn to dream in the classroom, students need various opportunities to collaborate in order to increase the collective self-efficacy exponentially. Students learn from each other, support each other and validate each other.

When students work in an authentically open and supportive setting, they will take more risks, face challenges head on, and cultivate genuine enthusiasm for learning.

Leadership next steps

Instructional leaders need to recognize the daunting task teachers have in creating environments where all students are supported in caring, inclusive ways. Educators who understand the meaning of rigor and self-efficacy will have more success with staff and students.

Furthermore, we know that building a successful community within a classroom, might mean teachers restructuring their classroom practices to intertwine social development with curricular instruction (Naraian, 2011). Such efforts will require strong, knowledgeable and supportive educational administrators.

Instructional leaders who understand that rigor and relationships are central to providing quality assessment and instruction will experience success.

Instructional leaders might consider the following five questions to support this implementation process:

- How do we as leaders support the progress of learning expectations of the Com-



mon Core in every classroom, K-12?

- How do we help teachers understand the relationship between rigor and self-efficacy within the classroom?
- How is collaboration fostered for all staff, at grade level bands, vertically as well as across content areas?
- How do we ensure that specific needs at our site are being met through the Common Core State Standards?
- How is staff able to meet the needs of unique populations – ELL, special disabilities, socio-economic – with the Common Core curriculum?

This is an exciting time for learning communities in schools. Common Core demands that we rethink how caring and inclusive environments are created. Only with a deep understanding of the power of both rigor and self-efficacy can we be sure that all students, regardless of needs and abilities, experience success.

Resources

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