

Podcast: Examining the Dark Side of Rigor



Ole Jorgenson and Percy Abram, authors of the article [The Dark Side of Rigor](#), share their past and current experiences and research in exploring problems that arise when rigor is defined as “lots of difficult work” rather than depth and challenges in learning. They share ways to engage staff and parents in important reflections connecting quality learning and wellness.

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[Find the article, “The Dark Side of Rigor” here.](#)

[Find the article, “Changing the Conversation About Homework from Quantity and Achievement To Quality and Engagement” here.](#)

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Steve [Intro]: 00:00 Hello and welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. Instructional coaches and leaders create the environment that supports teachers to continually imagine, grow and achieve. They model an excitement for learning that teachers in turn model for students. This podcast is dedicated to promoting the important aspects of instructional leadership. Thanks for listening.

Steve: 00:28 Examining the dark side of rigor. I came across an article titled, "The Dark Side of Rigor" in the Independent School Magazine, and I invited the authors to join the podcast and share their thinking. So I'm pleased to introduce Ole Jorgensen and Percy Abram, who are both heads of Independent Schools. So guys, would you take a moment and tell folks a little bit about the two schools that you're serving now.

Percy: 00:58 Sure. I'll go first. Thanks again, Steve, for this opportunity. Percy Abraham, I'm the head of the Bush school in Seattle Washington. The Bush school was founded in 1924 by a disciple of John Dewey named Helen Taylor Bush. And she believed fervently that the best learning came from doing and our tagline, "experience education" has been a part of our DNA since it's early founding. We began as an all-girl school, we went coed in about 1972 and we are now a co-ed school K through 12 of about 700 students located just east of downtown Seattle.

Steve: 01:38 Great. Thanks. Ole?

Ole: 01:40 Thanks Steve and I'll second Percy's thank you for the opportunity. I serve Almaden Country Day School, we are a preschool through eighth grade school in San Jose, California. Much younger than the Bush school, ACDS was founded in 1982. Our mission is equally embedded in our DNA though, and that is to discover the gifts in every child. We are also a progressive school. We believe that children learn best in a high opportunity, low stress environment and we really try to

emphasize student wellness and joy on par with rigor and trying to instill character development in children.

Steve: 02:20 Thanks. So when I read the article as being the dark side of rigor, I was guessing that that meant there was another side too. So I'm wondering if you if you might tell us about the two sides of rigor.

Percy: 02:36 Yeah, I think in many of our schools, rigor is purported to be something that not only students hope to achieve, faculty hope to achieve, but parents more so than any constituent group are hopeful in instilling in their children with the notion that increased pressure, higher stakes will lead to greater outcomes. And I think that is the more euphemistic side of how people view rigor and the dark side are the consequences of that. And consequentially, we have seen that increased pressure, higher stakes, leads to greater anxiety, greater bouts of depression, more negative student behaviors, and can ultimately, what I have found really discourage and dissuade students from engaging in really challenging, exciting engaging academic pursuits. And what I've noticed is that the sooner you begin to introduce rigor for the sake of rigor, the sooner students fall out of love with the process of becoming an educated citizen.

Ole: 03:50 Yeah. That's really well said, Percy. I would add, in addition to the toll the dark side takes, the sleep deprivation and the emotional fatigue and anxiety, we have to recognize there's a sub population of students of course who – I mean, looking at the bright side, there are students who thrive on, I think in the article we say, "being fed and watered with facts and memorization and massive homework loads," but these are the in my opinion, and I defer to Percy's workinf in the high school, but I think these are the exception and, you know, rigorous suffering, we call it, it does work for some kids, but it's really other kids are paying the price. The bright side though, and we talk about in the article, when teachers demand that that students think deeply

and stretch their intellectual grasp, like really push them to go beyond where they're comfortable in terms of what they know and what they assume and what they believe, past their apprehension and into these academic challenges, intellectual academic challenges, as opposed to just a brutal workload, that's the type of rigor that we are trying to regain or tap back into in the article.

Steve: 05:07 I'm hearing challenge and depth as more appropriate words to get to the brighter side of what rigor could mean.

Ole: 05:20 Yeah, as opposed to just workload. Just a crushing workload.

Percy: 05:25 Yeah. And that's been my sense, Steve. Again, this is the fifth school that I've been a part of, the second school that I've led, at all schools, independent schools that is, now have this opportunity to create a mission and a philosophy and a pedagogical style that fits with their community. Being here at the Bush school, what I have noticed is there is no lack of academic challenge for our students. Our students are not only bright and capable, but they are eager learners and that is first seeded as they come into the school as five year olds and I have noticed that that continues on through graduation at 18. And it is very refreshing to see that our students want to learn more, they want to know how, not only for a grade, but really for the sense of, how can I better understand this material? How can I better understand my relationship with the material, my peers, and how can I, take this concept and idea and expand upon it for the growth of learning? And I think ultimately, that's what the sensation, the joy that brought us into education and what our students are doing so well here and having served on Ole's board when I was in California, I know that same joy in learning is expressed by his students at his school too.

Steve: 06:51 Quite a few of the schools that I've been working

with, I've tossed around the thought that the COVID pandemic and quarantining of schools kind of put a spotlight on strengths that were in schools and weaknesses that were in schools. So more than creating something new, it kind of spotlighted things for us. I'm wondering, is there a connection with that happening? With the concept of rigor during that time?

Ole: 07:24 That's a great question. I feel like – I haven't read anything that that would be an academic research study or anything of that sort, but so this is anecdotal and maybe Percy has seen something different in Seattle, but it seemed like for a period of time during COVID, from March, 2020 until maybe June of this year, everyone was attuned to student wellness in ways that they might not have been before. I don't know that all of the high schools around here necessarily adapted in ways that helped students stay well. I think if anything, the load increased with a lot of the memorization and so on, but I do think that for a while, people were really attentive to it. I don't know what's going to happen now, as we return to familiar practices ostensibly this school year, whether people will be eager to get back to the way things were or not.

Ole: 08:27 We had an open house right before COVID started and I think this illustrates it for you, Steve. This open house was the variety where parents come to campus during a school day and are allowed to pop into classrooms and our students come up and talk to the parents at the doorway about what they're doing in class and parents can kind of observe for a little bit. So we had a dad that visited and went to a couple of the first and third grade classrooms and came up to me afterwards and he said, "so I've observed your classrooms and the first and third grade where my daughters will be attending next year and I noticed that, you know, there's a lot of laughter and the students are working in groups and they're clearly very engaged and they clearly love their teacher. At

what grade you start getting curious about academics at your school?"

Ole: 09:13 So I think there's this sense of, there's this like false binary that if kids are joyful, like at Percy school, they're joyful, they're curious, they're engaged, they want to learn, and they're not suffering, then somehow that's not academic. And I think that if we return to that after the pandemic is over, then I think we've lost an opportunity.

Percy: 09:39 Yeah, I will say my experience here has been that not only were faculty, teachers and staff and parents really attuned to their children's mental health and understanding the effect that the larger world and the forces that were sort of coming, crashing down on them or having on their relationships with school, we all understood that. And we moved to a schedule that allotted a lot more time or breaks in the day, we allowed for different forms of assessment, which I think is a healthy way for us to determine which kids are actually accessing the curriculum as opposed to identifying the students who are able to access the curriculum most quickly.

Percy: 10:30 We gave students an opportunity to do different types of group work, all in the service of keeping them systematically engaged in our academic program. I think we will continue to look for new and different ways to assess kids to understand that it is really not the rapidity with which you can come up with an answer that determines how successful you are in school and to also understand that there are multiple gifts that students bring into the classroom that may not have been recognized in the regular program. I would say I have had one or two parents who were, like Ole, who were concerned in June that we hadn't completed the standard third grade curriculum and what were we going to do to remediate over the summer or accelerate in the fall and just in having an individual conversation with those parents and saying, look, if we're behind, most people are

behind. Everyone is going through this at the same time and what we're most concerned with is, how is your child processing these forces, again, that really are changing the ways in which they are interacting with their peers on a daily basis. And I'm hoping we can keep that front and center as we move back out of the crisis of this pandemic.

Steve: 11:49 So let me extend that. In general, as observing in a classroom, what are the indicators that that kids are engaged in that depth and challenge?

Percy: 12:00 Well, some of them are the extent to which all students in the classroom are participating in the discussion. Because, again, it becomes very easy to recede back both physically in the classroom and sort of metaphorically and not participate if you have a number of students in there who are saying, "I have the answer first, I remember reading this last night." But the extent to which all students are actively engaged in the conversation, I would say the extent to which the teacher is pushing each of the students beyond their boundaries and calling on other students who typically aren't participating to be active participants in the class. So all of that really gives you a sense that there is action, there's movement. That that's one aspect. And I would also say, in the Helen and John Dewey tradition of learning by doing, the ways in which our kids are not only working in the classroom at their desks with their teachers, but are doing project based hands-on learning.

Ole: 13:09 I would just add a visual cause I totally agree with Percy. I headed boarding and a high school my first headship and we had a cluster of teachers in the high school where I remember being outside their rooms or in their classrooms and the students were so engaged in whatever the discussions were or the topics were that the teachers had to push them out the doors and they would go into the next class still going at it. And the math teacher would walk down the hall to the theory of knowledge teacher and say, "what are you

doing to these kids?" So that is what we're after that is lighting the fire and it's possible.

Steve: 13:49 That makes me laugh because a whole lot of years ago, I was finding administrators who were looking for closure on a lesson and I suggested that when it ended without closure because kids were still arguing as they walked out in the hall, you probably were at a stronger spot for learning. Percy, in the article you mentioned some things that you were doing at the Bush school that I thought might be good to share with the listeners.

Percy: 14:17 Yeah. I'm happy to do that. So our high school was, until about four years ago, on a standard trimester program, 10 weeks per term, and each student took six classes per day. And what it essentially meant was that every day, you had homework and almost all of your classes. So you were coming home and doing homework across six classes and that at the end of a term, a teacher, because most of our courses in the upper school posts freshman year are elective classes, twice a year, our teachers will be creating a new class to be taught. So it just meant that the pace of the school day and the school year felt insufferable in some ways and was beginning to take its toll. And so we worked with an organization out of Stanford University called Challenge Success, where we put a team of parents, faculty, and students together to find different ways to sort of de-stress the day.

Percy: 15:15 And we moved to a new academic schedule, year long schedule that was on semesters and a daily schedule where the students met three times a day. And so they had about an hour and a half classes so that it's all long blocks and there's community time and what we call time for our students to meet with their teachers and advisors in the beginning of the end of the day so that no kid is leaving school, not clear on what an assignment is, not clear on what they need to know. I'm not clear on what their homework will look like for that evening and in the future. It came with a great deal of

consternation because it did mean that we had to reduce the number of courses that we could offer and student choice was a big part of that. So what we did was implement what we call a cascades program.

Percy: 16:03 And our cascades program is an interdisciplinary time in the year, three weeks in January, three weeks in May, where we pair our teachers. So you have a science teacher or an English teacher who are talking about the ways in which Thoreau has influenced the scientists. And you talk about authentic learning and really touching kids at their passion, the cascades program does exactly that. So we added that element in there too, again, to add some student choice, but for three weeks, it's just a concentrated block of time where kids are studying really deeply intently and purposefully about subjects they're really passionate in. So we've done some survey work after that and what we have found again, the great consternation from students was lack of choice. The great consternation from families was lack of rigor.

Percy: 17:00 And what we have found is that in the academic day, our students are no less challenged by the work that they're doing, find that there's great opportunity for them to coordinate and plan with other students, find that they're leaving each conference period at the end of the day, where the checking in with their teachers, with a clear understanding of what the assignment is and what work needs to be done. And then at the same has been true for our Cascades programs. We've measured the level of anxiety and stress and it's gone down by about 40% in that time. It's been a really big success. And our faculty have also found, I would say, sort of as an added bonus, that their levels of stress have gone down too, since they're not churning through a new course after 10 weeks, not grading every kids in their class's paper each night. And it's meant for more hospitable environment and one that we're centering student learning and engagement rather than on texts read, chapters filled. So it's been a

huge success and I would give all credit to the faculty for moving us through that change.

Steve: 18:20 Sounds great. Ole, I'm wondering if you might trigger for us, a lot of our listeners to this podcast work as instructional coaches in classrooms or administrators who are highly engaged in the instructional coaching part of their administrative part. I'm wondering, what are the kinds of conversations you see people in those positions looking to have with teachers to assist teachers in making decisions along the lines of depth and challenge and rigor?

Ole: 19:03 Sure. So, one of the conversations at this school and at my previous school, the division heads had with faculty, because division heads in the schools where I serve, their primary role is as instructional coaches. For example, around the notion of homework, in 2012, I think it was, the Stanford's Challenge Success Program, a bunch of their researchers developed a longitudinal study of research on homework and they extracted they created a white paper. It's very readable. It's on Stanford's website, easy to get. But they aggregated 50 years of homework research and tried to distill some of the main points. And so, years ago, at this school and at my last school, the division heads talked about homework and in 2012, we're able to use this white paper to go over some of the the findings and the guidance from these researchers.

Ole: 20:01 And one of the things that that became central in our conversation is, it's really not so much about the amount of homework, although, there are some metrics that you can use that are recommended in terms of the number of hours, but it's about the quality of the homework and the purpose of the homework and asking teachers to reflect on why they're giving homework and what the intention of the homework is, really opens up opportunities to explore the notion of rigor and what we're about what we're after in our classrooms. At the boarding school, two things emerged from conversations about

student wellness and rigor and this was back in 2004. The first one was, and we have a lot of control at a boarding school clearly, but we started the school day 45 minutes later. We changed the starting time later to give the students more time to sleep.

Ole: 20:52 And that made again, it's all, tyranny of anecdotes, but anecdotally, the teachers said that the students were better prepared and more alert and more engaged in their early classes. The second thing that we did was we set up a test and assignment calendar and the division heads monitored it very closely. This is something that instructional coaches I know talk about as well. So that there's a maximum of one major test per day or a maximum of, one project per week or whatever the negotiation is with the teachers because that, again helps give the students what they need. And that is time. Time to sleep, time to prepare, time to get their work done, time to do their sports, time to do some social stuff and have fun at school. So for instructional coaches, I think this notion of talking about why we're doing what we're doing, and then looking at ways that we can support student wellness without abandoning student achievement, but I think Percy would agree, they're not mutually exclusive. In fact, kids are gonna achieve more if they have more bandwidth.

Steve: 22:06 Any sign-off, closing encouragement you want to put out there for administrators and teacher-leaders who are listening in?

Percy: 22:17 Well, the only piece that I would offer Steve is that, as I mentioned earlier, the reason why we got into this field in the first place was really to see that spark that our students have as they are discovering new material, as they're discovering how it relates to the world around them, and the extent to which that we can place that as a paramount importance in our work and our programming and in our curricular drive, I think we'll see great success.

Ole: 22:44 Yeah, I agree and it's going to take some time I think. I think we started this conversation by talking about how, and I think Percy may have put this forward, this idea that parents are driving this whole movement toward rigor and paradoxically, rigor as suffering is jeopardizing the health of their children. So on one front, we've got to work with parents and focus on parent education and that's a steep that's a steep challenge.

Ole: 23:09 But with regard to the teachers and the administrators who are listening to this podcast, if we come back to why we're doing this, like Percy says, when you see that student in your class that gets it finally, and you have that burst of endorphins in your brain, you've been part of that connection. Or when you have these kids who challenge the assumptions you're putting forward, who catch you making a point or a misstatement, or catch you in a bias statement, you realize that you're helping shape this child, this young person for life. When they ask questions or when they question your answers. That's what we're after, that's rigor. And we do that. And we just need to focus on doing more of it and realize that if we can do that and think about the wellness of these people in front of us, we can reset this ourselves across the country, especially at independent schools, because we have the privilege and the obligation to do the right thing for kids.

Steve: 24:18 Well, thanks to both of you. I knew when I when I read the piece that this would be a great conversation. I'll put the link to the to your article into the lead-in as well. Have a great day, guys.

Percy: 24:34 You too, Steve.

Ole: 24:34 Thanks, Steve.

Steve [Outro]: 24:37 Thank you for listening. You can subscribe to Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud on iTunes and

Podbean. And please remember to rate and review us on iTunes. I also want to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.