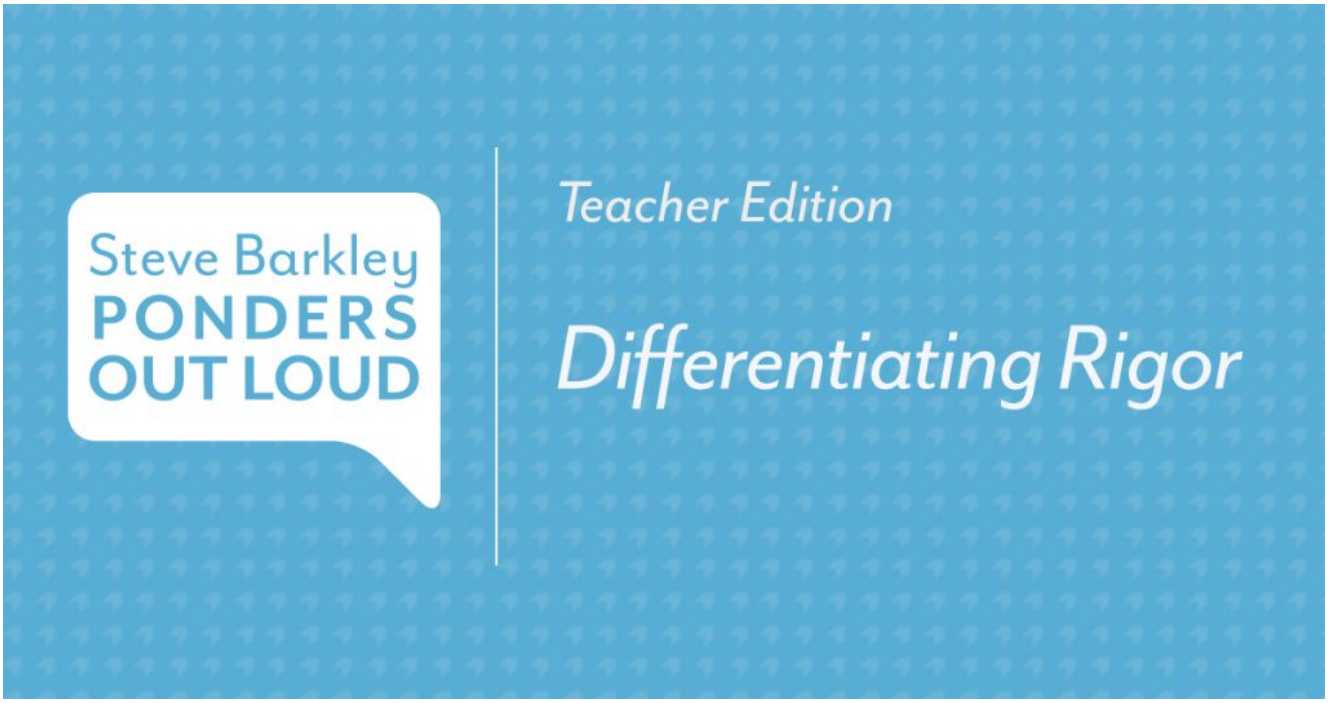
Podcast for Teachers: Differentiating Rigor



What is the difference between positive stress that increases learning and distress that is harmful to learning and wellness? How does a teacher differentiate rigor? Hear how one school changed their approach to final exams for documenting student learning. Ole Jorgeson and Percy Abram, authors of the article *The Dark Side of Rigor*, provide insights and suggestions.

Read Ole & Percy's article, "The Dark Side of Rigor" here.

Contact Ole: ojorgenson@almadencountryday.org

Contact Percy: percy.abram@bush.edu

Subscribe to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast on iTunes or visit BarkleyPD.com to find new episodes!

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTAd: 00:00 Are you ready to take your career to a whole new level? PLS Classes can help you get there. A resource designed to empower and advance educators, PLS

Classes offers online on-site and remote courses that will elevate your professional expertise. By enrolling in a course through one of our accredited college partners, you will learn research-based strategies that you can apply in the classroom. To learn more, visit plsclasses.com today. Your future awaits.
Steve [Intro]: 00:30 Hello, and welcome to the teacher edition of the Steve Barkley Ponders Out loud podcast. The complexity of teaching is both challenging and rewarding. And my curiosity is peaked whenever I explore with teachers the multiple pathways for facilitating student engagement in the exciting world of learning. This podcast looks to serve teachers as they motivate coach and support their learners.

Steve: 01:00 Differentiating rigor. Joining us today on the podcast are Ole Jorgensen and Percy Abram, who are heads of Independent Schools and the authors of an article titled, "The Dark Side of Rigor." Welcome guys. I'm wondering if you'd jump in with just a short introduction to yourself and what experiences led you to examine the dark side of rigor?

Ole: 01:30 Great. Thanks Steve. Thank you for the opportunity to share today. I currently, since 2008, work at a preschool through eighth grade, 370 student independent school called Almaden Country Day School in south San Jose, California. Our mission is to discover the gifts in every child, and we believe that children learn best in a high opportunity, low stress learning environment. So we're about balance of rigor, yes, but character development and joy. We want children to have a joyful learning experience. So it fits my philosophy. But before that, I was the head of a K-12 boarding and day school and it was at the high school where – I was living with high school students on campus 24/7. And I witnessed the, the effect of the stress of their academic preparations and the homework load at the time when I arrived at the school and the ways in which that was impacting their mental and emotional health, depriving them of sleep and so on. So that really was the catalyst for me to begin looking at student wellness and its relationship to student achievement.

Percy: 02:48 Yeah, thanks so much. So my name is Percy Abram. I serve as the head of the Bush School in Seattle, Washington K-12 co-ed school. It's about 700 students, founded on the principles of John Dewey, our famed founder, Helen Taylor Bush, truly believed in learning by doing. And you can see that in our curriculum and our philosophical approach to working with children and in the joy that our students have. So I like to talk about our three-step journey as a K-12 school in our lower school as one in which play is really centered and not only are students playing, but their learning is joyful. And they turn that sense of play as they move into the middle school to a real sense of passion. The things that they became interested in as early adolescents, they began to focus on more intently and more deeply and moving onto the high school, turning that sense of passion into purpose, which means, how can I take this passion things that I felt compelled to do and use that to make a difference in the world around me.

Percy: 03:54 And that's really what the aim of our school is to make informed citizens that can help make a difference in this world. And what I know in working across all three divisions and certainly with high school students, is that the intense pressure that comes with being around bright, capable students, can tend to make kids feel compelled to compete against one another. And that competition can be grossly unhealthy and have really negative consequences. It can lead to certainly disordered eating, certainly around cheating in the classroom, around prevaricating with family members about what your academic pursuits. And ultimately, what I have seen at two schools where I've worked is it can have the ultimate consequences in leading to death by suicide. And there's no one factor that's ever been attributable to a suicide, but I do know that that intense pressure, not only from parents and faculty, but from peers as well can lead to unhealthy consequences. And so I believe that as educators at the Bush School, we're on a mission to make sure that learning is

joyful and our students are engaged in the work that they're doing so that they can take this again and do what we're all hoping to do – make our world a better place.

Steve: 05:24 Thanks. In the article, you mentioned the term eustress and distress, and I'm wondering if you can break those meetings out for the listeners.

Ole: 05:38 Yeah, sure. You know, we want to be clear in the article. We're not making an argument against rigor or academic achievement or ambition or any of those things, but we just want to help people make a distinction between the type of academic engagement and academic activity that is healthy and challenging, and that which causes young people to become unhealthy. And they're fairly obscure terms from psychology, but they're important in this context. The term eustress is normal within range, psychological stress, that's beneficial. We all get butterflies when we stand up in front of a podium and that's supposed to happen. In fact, it heightens our senses. It triggers chemicals in the brain. There's lots of good things that come from this type of stress. Or maybe we've got a deadline coming up and we're really energized to get things done before the deadline. That energy comes from eustress.

Ole: 06:46 It's positive, psychological stress. Distress is harmful. It impairs us physically and emotionally and it can have a lasting impact on our health. This punishing homework load that these kids today have to deal with that takes away from the sleep adolescents need. The research is really clear. Kids are sleeping much less than they used to 10 and 20 years ago and this is not healthy. Or the anxiety that comes with this hyper competitive push for grades and AP scores. That masquerade is rigor. That's not rigor, that's distress. So it's not that stress is bad, it's just that our students today are dealing with distress and not eustress and that is a serious threat to their mental and physical wellbeing.

Steve: 07:37 The other term you used that caught my attention and I guess that it fits in here, you labeled differentiated rigor. Percy, I'm wondering if you could talk around that a little bit.

Percy: 07:52 Yeah. So when I think about differentiated rigor, it really is thinking about the ways in which our teachers are providing
appropriate challenges to our students where they are. I'll use a track metaphor, not every student is going to finish the finish line at the same time. And we know that every child that we're working with is capable of pushing beyond their perceived limitations. And so finding ways in which our teachers can provide appropriate levels of challenge and rigor for each kid and where they are is appropriate. One of the things that I think we do exceedingly well at our school is taking kids where they are, differentiating the instruction, the level of challenge, but certainly not the expectations for success. And knowing that the student may come to an understanding of a concept, may get through a reading of a paper at a different time period.

Percy: 08:55 But what we're really interested in in the very end is whether or not they can understand the material that's being presented to them. And for some, that's going to happen over the course of two weeks, others it'll happen over the course of four weeks. So giving them opportunities to come back to material and using sort of an iterative process of learning so that they can reflect on what they've learned, maybe make a cognitive leap in an area is something that we're hopeful to do with our students.

Steve: 09:28 I'm currently working with some schools on instructional agility and they talk about measuring the student learning, but I've been building into it, it's also measuring the student's response to the task. So while I can put the same task out in front of three kids, the stress level of the three kids can be very different. And so it's not just

assessing whether or not they learned it, but assessing how they're engaging in the learning is kind of what I'm hearing and being able to differentiate the rigor.

Percy: 10:12 Yeah, exactly.

Steve: 10:14 I read in your article, a piece that you've described about the Notre Dame high school and what they were doing with exams and I
wondered if you'd share that piece with the listeners.

Ole: 10:27 Sure thing. So Notre Dame is a high school for girls here in San Jose. I think it departs from the stereotype of the Catholic school as being a very traditional sort of very teacher-centric model of education. Notre Dame is taking strides in a very progressive direction. About five years ago, the teachers approached the administration and asked them to allow them an opportunity to look at ways in which their assessment model wasn't reflective of what they thought the girls were learning. They were using fairly conventional methods and they were doing a fair amount of formative assessment too, but nothing out of the norm. So over the period of a couple of years, the administration gave the teachers, the faculty, the authority and the charge to look at some different ways of doing things.

Ole: 11:29 And one of the changes that came out of that initiative which really was around what I think Percy I would call a pursuit of true rigor, right? How do we know what these kids are learning? And are we seeing what they really know using these methods? One of the things that came out of that was that they were the first school in this area to radically restructure final exams. They determined that a single test in a single point in time largely, often cumulative for an entire year, did not reflect what their students knew or could do after year of study. And Percy will love this because a number of their options were activity-based. Not every student demonstrates their strengths through memorization and recall,

even though that's still the dominant model of learning in our country.

Ole: 12:24 So yeah, now the girls have a choice at Notre Dame. They can do the final exam, or they can take on one of a variety of different projects, art, or performing arts, or, they can step out into other subjects related to the course of study. They can do Socratic seminars that they design. They can structure a debates between multiple students. They can take charge of the model of assessment that will show them in their best light and showcase their strengths beyond just memorization. And that has, again, this is one school. I don't know that you can extract generalizable findings, but they have found anecdotally, that the girls are expressed the less stress they are. They end the year more enthusiastically in the classes and the range of the assessments according to their admission director is pretty staggering what these girls come up with. When they're given a chance to choose, they're are so much more engaged in the experience.

Steve: 13:33 Very neat, very neat. It's going through my mind, I had a chance to do a podcast with with Heather Lyon, who wrote a book about engagement and the two top levels of engagement that she works for are interested and absorbed. So I can hear that kind of activity you're describing as one that takes students to absorbed. I could see people going into it thinking this is going to be better than the exam and then finding that they work themselves really, really deeply and ended up with a whole lot more work than their exam would have been, but they got absorbed that that's the cool part. Guys, to what to wrap up, I'm wondering if you might offer up to the teachers listening in, what do you see as the greatest challenge or one of the big challenges teachers face with this question about rigor and maybe a suggestion that you have for them as how they'd respond to that challenge.

Percy: 14:37 So with regard to the challenges teachers would face, I would say this idea of differentiated rigor, it's

difficult, right? Because you are not asking all students to do the same thing. You're actually meeting kids where they are. It means that your instruction looks different. It means that the ways in which you're asking kids to demonstrate that they've reached the material looks different. And it means that you're, in some ways, creating multiple paths to success in the classroom, which is ultimately what we want to do. and it's very hard to do. And I would say the sort of psychological impediment to all of this really is giving yourself permission to say adding one more novel to the course, increasing the number of chapters covered over the course of this term does not necessarily mean that our students are going to be better prepared or more thoughtful, curious learners. So giving yourself permission to say, we're going to spend the same amount of time, but we'll reduce the number of texts that we're going to bring in to the class this time, because our kids are really delving more deeply and intimately into the work there. And that sometimes, as a teacher, I would feel like, am I failing my students? Is this really not what I should be doing?

Steve: 16:03 It's not as easy to document students' learning as it is to document the work they did.

Percy: 16:11 Exactly.

Steve: 16:11 Ole, you've got a piece you'd add there?

Ole: 16:13 Yeah, I totally agree with Percy. I guess I might've said the same thing so I'll say something different and that is that, one of the things that's hard for teachers is that some of this is out of their hands, in that, the food chain from the universities, they set these expectations for admission, particularly the selective universities, that set the standard for students, which drives all of this suffering. The universities tell the high schools, let us teach calculus and then they make it absolutely necessary to take calculus to be able to qualify for the sorts of courses, coursework, and

degrees and scholarships and admission standards that the universities set. And then the high schools tell the middle schools, let us teach algebra, but we have to get kids into geometry if we're going to get them into the science track that gets them prepared for college.

Ole: 16:58 So there's this machine that I think sets up challenges for teachers. And as a result then, parents, as we say in the article, we've normalized student suffering and we call that rigor. So a hard class is a rigorous class. Until we break out of that mindset, until we elevate – what we can do is elevate student wellness on par with student achievement. When we do that, we can help break out of the mindset of rigor for rigor's sake and help young people escape from the suffering and reach their potential as learners.

Steve: 17:42 Well, thank you both so much. I'll build into the lead-in to the podcast, the link to your articles, and I'll include your email addresses so that people can contact you directly with any questions. Appreciate the time, guys.

Percy: 17:59 Thanks so much, Steve.

Ole: 17:59 Thank you, Steve.

Steve [Outro]: 18:03 Thanks for listening in folks. I'd love 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.