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Introduction

Why This Book?

The purpose of this book is to tease out what school leaders, in partnership with district leaders and teachers, can do to transform the instructional culture of their schools so that every classroom is engaged in rigorous learning. This is a personal story for me. At Acreage Pines Elementary, where I was principal from 2013 to 2016, our staff took up the challenge to completely reimagine our instructional culture and our classroom practice—to let go of the good things we were already doing in order to pursue even better things.¹ In the process, we also transformed our vision of leadership and of learning. We all discovered that true, sustained transformation is not a static destination; it's a state of mind that requires continuously renewed purpose, passion, and persistence.

Acreage Pines Elementary was a good school. And like many good schools, we had high, or higher, student achievement compared to other elementary schools in the state, significant parental involvement, committed teachers, and well-behaved students. But as a principal in South Florida in 2013, I began to ask myself some tough questions. Were we reporting acceptable test scores *in spite of* our level of instruction and leadership or because of it? Which characteristics of the building's community determined our school's success? And what were we leaving on the table when we settled for a school that had plateaued at the level of good but was failing to continuously improve? In talking to other principals, I have found that many school leaders, in all types of schools, from successful to struggling, feel that there's something missing, but they can't quite put their finger on what that *something* is. Nevertheless, the pressure to improve instruction and transform our vision of student learning is greater than ever as we hope to prepare our students to meet the unique challenges of the 21st century.

1 This notion of giving up good things comes from educational researcher and speaker Dylan Wiliam, who notes that leadership is so hard because “it requires preventing people from doing good things to give them time to do even better things.”

Most instructionally rooted principals can identify traditional instruction when they see it, and many are aware that our traditional pedagogies are no longer enough to develop 21st century skills in our students. But school leaders may lack the knowledge, skill, or will to address the issue. School leaders may be hesitant on two fronts: they may not be sure of the most effective next steps to propel their schools beyond their current plateau to continuously improve, and they may be fearful of pushing faculty who feel they are already successful—why disrupt the status quo? There is usually no great impetus to transform a school that appears to be working just fine, but many leaders are aware that their schools could be better and that they are underserving their students. Interestingly, Darling-Hammond and Rothman (2015) concluded from their study of high-performing schools in Finland, Singapore, and Canada that internationally, the most successful school systems began to improve only when *they recognized that they needed improvement!*

I hope you will take up and adapt the lessons we learned, the strategies we used, and the structures we developed together to move your own schools toward a culture of rigorous instruction. What we found during our process of transformation, as we worked hard to increase the level of rigor in our classrooms, was that our enthusiasm, optimism, hope, and sense of purpose were renewed. Prioritizing rigorous instruction in our school simultaneously transformed our sense of ourselves as collaborative professionals pursuing a critical mission: We were thoroughly engaged in the highest and most rewarding aspects of teaching and learning.

New Research and Policy Imperatives

The approach we took to school transformation was grounded in research and developed in partnership with Learning Sciences International as part of their Schools for Rigor. Over the years, numerous studies have addressed the major concepts providing the foundation for our implementation. These concepts focused our discussions and made up the backbone of our common language, so it will be useful to present a brief overview of some of them here.

The concept of *productive struggle* was one of the keys that unlocked our growth at Acreage Pines. The idea of productive struggle arose from the Trends in International Mathematical and Science Study (TIMSS) and was investigated by Stigler, Gallimore, and Hiebert (2000) in their comparison of global teaching practices. Hiebert and Wearne (2003) and Hiebert and Grouws (2007), among others, went on to define and identify the benefits of productive struggle in fostering resilience, perseverance, engagement in learning, and achievement. The term has since entered the mainstream

of educational language and thought. Productive struggle, for both students and adult learners, means engaging in effort, thinking, or learning that is just beyond one's current abilities; the concept is similar to K. Anders Ericsson's (2003) definition of *deliberate practice*. Studies have found that students engaged in productive struggle in math, for example, retain the material better, evidence higher levels of conceptual thinking, and are able to offer more alternative ways to solve problems (Kapur, 2016). As we worked on implementing our project at Acreage Pines and talked to other principals and teachers engaged in the same work, I came to see productive struggle as part of the larger process of change not only for students but for my faculty and myself. We had to learn to embrace that struggle, a story I'll tell in detail in part 1 of this book.

Our conversations and thinking were also greatly influenced by 21st century learning theory and by a focus on developing what Michael Toth (2016) identified as "new economy skills." A good part of the rationale for putting in the effort to move to great is to develop the skills in students that will prepare them for what researcher Dylan Wiliam likes to say is "a world we cannot imagine." Autor, Levy, and Murnane (2003) have shown that changes in necessary workplace skills between 1969 and 1999 include a 14 percent increase in complex communication skills and an 8 percent increase in expert thinking and problem solving, with corresponding decreases in routine and nonroutine manual labor and routine cognitive skills. Those increases have widened in the ensuing years, and we can expect the trend to continue. We know as well that jobs are being outsourced and automated at an astonishing rate. As principals and teachers, we are all feeling increasing pressure to educate students to face these new realities. As Seymour Papert so presciently observed in a 1998 lecture, "We need to produce people who know how to act when faced with situations for which they were not specifically prepared."

And, of course, new rigorous state standards and new leadership standards were designed to incorporate and address these realities. Common Core and standards designed in alignment with Common Core, like those in Florida, were created to help students develop higher-order thinking skills that will serve them well in the new economy. To get to the full intent and rigor of the standards, there are necessary instructional shifts that must be made—it's clear we need to strengthen core instruction.

"Rigorous" skills help students get comfortable with drawing out implications and testing hypotheses and with asking large questions. They are skills developed over time—what Costa and Kallick (2009) call "habits of mind" or that Marzano (2007) identifies as "dispositions"—that allow us to fruitfully engage in complex endeavors.

A focus on rigorous skills inculcates in students what British researcher Guy Claxton (2007) refers to as the “capacity to learn.” Claxton challenges teachers to think about what that would look like:

[W]hat would it mean to organize your classroom and your pedagogy in such a way that every day, little by little, in the midst of literacy hour, or during an experiment on magnets, your students were learning to learn more robustly, more broadly, more skillfully and more flexibly? . . . They will need to design activities that deliberately focus on stretching each aspect of learning capacity, and ensure that this goal is not eclipsed by a more familiar focus on the acquisition of knowledge and the completion of tasks. (pp. 121–122)

A Definition of Rigor: Where Cognitive Complexity Meets Autonomy

The following diagram offers one way to understand the interrelated components of classroom rigor. Cognitive complexity and student autonomy are shown as variables juxtaposed on X- and Y-axes (figure I.1). Rigor becomes the intersecting point of the two.

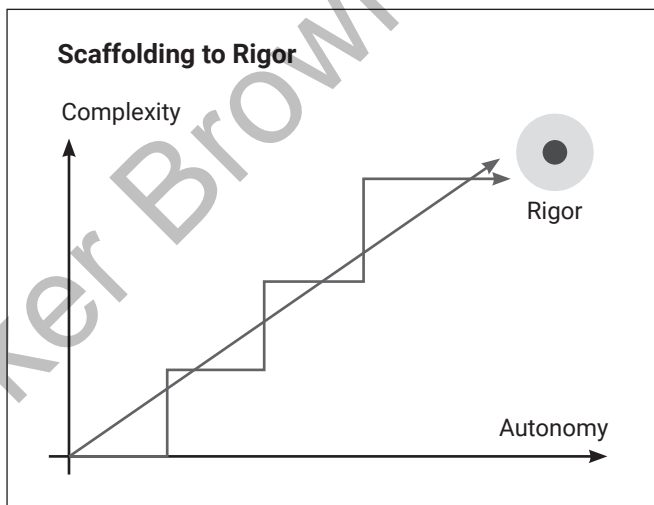


Figure I.1: Rigor is defined as the intersection of cognitive complexity and student autonomy.

Emerging National School Leadership Standards

Since 2004, the Wallace Foundation has continued to produce studies on the effect of the school leader on student learning, the importance of preparing school leaders for a changing world, and the necessity for succession planning to ensure principal pipelines. New Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) supports this focus on emphasizing instructional leadership and standards-aligned curriculum, paired with standards reinforcing a community of care, diversity, and equal opportunity for all students as student demographics continue to shift. As school leaders, we are continually challenged to ask ourselves tough questions: What does it mean to be a school leader in the 21st century? And what are the skills we need to develop as leaders to support true 21st century classrooms?

How This Book Is Organized

This book is organized according to what I came to identify as the eight phases of growth to transform instructional culture for rigor. Part 1 explores the five phases of productive struggle—setting the vision, the deconstruction, the mud, the power of teams, and the joy of teaching—and focuses on changing habits of practice. Each chapter delves into the truth of what teachers and leaders experience, the wins that come out of each phase, and the practical tips that will help educators navigate each phase. In part 2, we discuss risks, rewards, and reflections that will help you and your school sustain your momentum in years to come. Part 2 details three additional phases necessary for sustainability and long-term growth: getting back to the end, digging deeper, and distributed leadership. Throughout each chapter, you'll hear personal anecdotes from teachers, administrators, visitors to our school, and district leaders—some engaged in parallel work in the same years—about the ups and downs, the struggles, and the *ahas* of our transformation. Each chapter also ends with a summary of key leadership strategies, the pitfalls to avoid in each phase of growth, and discussion questions for pushing your thinking. Every chapter includes QR codes, scannable on any smartphone, that will take you directly to a web page with sample planning templates and artifacts from our journey. These you can adapt for your own school's needs.