

Images of Rigor

A certain severity surrounds the concept of rigor. We imagine detailed discussions on the fine points of grammar; endless repetition of chemical formulas; long hours of drill and practice. But this is not at all what rigor should look like. Here are some different images:

- At Agnes Irwin School in Rosemont, Pennsylvania, teacher Barbara Barnett shows her French students a videotaped interview she had conducted with Marcel Jabelot (Barnett, 1995). In the interview, conducted entirely in French, the 70-year old Jabelot discusses his experiences in the Holocaust and his lifelong quest to find meaning in his suffering and the suffering of others. The students lean forward, their eyes focused and intent. They often stop the video to take notes, look up terms, and discuss what Jabelot is trying to tell them. As they study the video, the students' own vocabularies begin to shift. They no longer sound like the textbook. As Barnett tells it, "Their voices are full of Jabelot."
- During the 1970s, poet Kenneth Koch (1990) journeyed into the New York City public schools, reading the works of Blake, Wordsworth, Dickinson, and other poets with students from 3rd to 9th grades. Koch taught his students how to read the great poetry of Eastern and Western literature. He showed them how to extract the central struggle, the poetic kernel, from what they read and how to use those ideas to enhance their own understanding and writing. According to Koch, nearly every literature textbook written for elementary students underrates the abilities of young readers to understand and appreciate poetry.
- Students in a 5th grade classroom in Briarcliff, New York, are reading books by logician Raymond Smullyan. They study the puzzles in his book, *What Is the Name of This Book? The Riddle of Dracula and Other Logical Puzzles* (1978) and discover an "error" he has made in the definition of a formal category. The students write Smullyan a letter explaining the discovery. He writes back acknowledging the confusion and thanking them for their insights. Later in the year, these same students will study number theory, explaining their answers to questions like, "What is the largest product that can be obtained from a series of addends whose sum is given?" Over the course of the next three years, the students' scores on the New York State tests soar from seventeenth to third in the country.
- In the Humanitas Program in Los Angeles, California, the children from the poorest neighborhoods are studying the works of Hobbes, Locke, and Jefferson. They read *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Camus and Sartre's *No Exit*. They are trying to understand the relationship between liberty and power, and how different concepts of these ideas played themselves out in colonial and modern times. During our visit there, an elaborately tattooed young man stopped us in the hallway to initiate a discussion about whether people's beliefs regarding liberty are solely a function of their economic status.

Before defining rigor, we ask you to use Figure 1.1 to examine your own experiences with rigor.

From Strong, R. W., Silver, H. F., Perini, M. J. (2001). *Teaching What Matters Most: Standards and Strategies for Raising Student Achievement*, pp. 5-6, ASCD.

Reflecting on Your Images of Rigor

As a student:

- What subjects or courses did you find most difficult?
- Did you ever have a teacher who taught in a rigorous manner? In what ways? How did you respond?
- Did you ever have a teacher whose expectations of you were too high?
- When you studied something demanding, what made that subject difficult? How did you go about gaining control over the content?
- Did you ever have a teacher who taught you in a non-rigorous, undemanding manner? How did that affect you?

As a teacher:

- What have been your experiences with teaching-attempting to teach-rigorously?
- What are some ideas or texts you have taught, or would like to teach, that you consider rigorous? Which of these would you consider too difficult for your students? What makes them difficult? What skills would your students need to master the material?
- When you are teaching a particularly difficult idea or text, how do you go about it? How do your students respond?
- What are the chief roadblocks facing you in your attempts to increase the rigor of the content you teach?

WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT DEFINITION OF RIGOR?