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Rigor vs. Vigor

Amy Purcell Vorenberg
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You can't pick up an article in the press about education these days, it seems, and not find the word "rigor" plastered all over it. Politicians on both sides of the aisle use it liberally. And many independent schools now season their mission statements and communications with the word. But every time I read it, I cringe. Why? Consider the *American Heritage Dictionary* definition of "rigor":

1. *Strictness or severity, as in temperament, action, or judgment.*
2. *A harsh or trying circumstance; hardship. See Synonyms at difficulty.*
3. *A harsh or cruel act.*

Why is it that so many independent schools in their mission statements, curricula, and marketing materials tout academic "rigor" as a salient goal? Do they truly want children to experience academics as severe and harsh? Are their math curricula cruel or their writing programs trying? Is that what they want for students?

My two decades of experience in the world of independent education assures me that this is not the case. What educators actually want for children is not academic rigor, but academic "vigor." Here's the *American Heritage* definition of "vigor":

1. *Physical or mental strength, energy, or force.*
2. *The capacity for natural growth and survival, as of plants or animals.*
3. *Strong feeling; enthusiasm or intensity.*

Consider the possibilities of academic vigor: Is it not our goal to engage students as active, energetic learners? To empower students to think boldly and intensely about math concepts or scientific inquiries? Isn't it our greatest satisfaction when students apply their intellectual and creative energy to problem solving in ways that inspire and extend our own understandings as teachers? I believe that we strive not for rigor but for vigorous growth, both mental and physical, at independent schools.

To some, perhaps, I seem too picky here. However, if a student were to use a word incorrectly, not understanding its nuances of meaning, we would, good teachers that we are, guide the child to choose a more appropriate, more precise word.

As a progressive educator, I believe that it is critically important to articulate clearly the rewards and challenges of creating learning environments that value the whole child. The term "academic rigor" does not begin to describe the vibrant learning communities that independent schools offer.

"Academic vigor" is a far better phrase to represent the work that we do at school every day.

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