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The Weft of Learning

Dominic A.A. Randolph, Head of School
Riverdale Country School

It is easy to think about the various strands, the sequence of courses, and the vertical connections across disciplines in our schools. Like the warp threads in weaving, they give our schools, our curricula and our work a clear direction. And yet, cloth is made up by warp *and* weft threads—that is what creates the actual fabric and gives cloth strength.

What are the weft threads, the horizontal-binding influences, in our schools? I would like to propose that we think more about the “weft” in our schools, those values and experiences that bind together our work and cut across grade levels, subjects and disciplines. By bringing more attention to the horizontal threads and making them an explicit part of our programs, we will create a stronger teacher-and-student fabric in our schools.

So, I would like to suggest six areas where we could focus our attention in order to improve *all* of our schools. I do work in a school community that is immensely privileged. At the same time, I do believe that all schools have the capacity to nudge learning back toward an education that truly serves all students and their future needs rather than the needs of systems that are outdated and do not always prioritize the learner’s needs.

Learning to Learn

Schools should be about crafting great learning for our community members. That is what we do best, and yet there is much that is distracting school communities from providing the most effective learning experiences. For example, we do not provide enough timely feedback about learning, nor do we offer students sufficient time to reflect upon their learning and how best to move forward.

Over the last 50 years, the research on cognition, thinking and learning has evolved dramatically. However, that research has

not permeated school practices. “Growth mindset,” a cognitive concept championed by Carol Dweck, has probably made the most inroads into school language and school culture. Still, it is often miscommunicated or there are overarching systems at work in schools that mitigate against developing such a mindset in our students.

For example, the averaging of grades during a semester or year is quite at odds with the idea of a growth mindset, even though averaging is very much a part of schools. We need to figure out good ways for educators to understand how learning can be improved by science, and we need to find ways for the scientists to learn how to translate their research into classroom practices the way that John Hattie, Daniel Willingham and Angela Duckworth are doing. The research is there, we just have to focus our schools on the translation and implementation of this research into classroom practices.

It is a major challenge for us to bring cognitive science into schools so it permeates our practices and thinking about education. What would it look like if, across every grade level in school, students learned both in and outside the classroom about topics like “retrieval practice” or “metacognition”? That could cut across the subject-area curriculum in every school and help our students become better lifelong learners. We need to summon the forces of science, design and education to create resources for teachers, students and parents that clearly show us how to change ineffective institutional and personal habits. This just should not be that difficult. How can our schools use science to inform how we help students learn how to learn more effectively?

Toggling Between Thinking and Building

If you ask people to name a truly transformative learning experience, it is often one that prompted an emotional response or involved collaborating with others in dynamic ways. As Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine have commented in their new book *In Search of Deeper Learning*, many students in some of the best high schools in the United States are disengaged and only working to seek

the credentials to get them to the next level of their education or careers. Interestingly, where Mehta and Fine find the most effective learning is in co-curricular activities, experiences that are outside of the classroom and that offer students choices and opportunities whereby learning is embedded in action. This is borne out by the research. When you make learning active, when you embed it within real life experiences, the results are much more effective.

And yet, classroom environments are not always conducive to toggling between theory and application. Indeed, kindergarten classes often toggle between learning and building, but that way of learning swiftly disappears as the children get older and their capacity for creativity declines. This is a shame. How can we maintain the belief in toggling between thinking and building, which is firmly part of a history of elementary education found in Waldorf schools and Montessori schools, and make that part of mainstream education from grades K-12 and beyond? We need to consider how the entirety of one's education is made up of hundreds of experiences that can be designed and intentionally put together in order to leverage learning.

As I mentioned before, the co-curricular experiences beyond the classroom offer such opportunities for deep learning. How can the co-curriculum become part of the formal curriculum of schools so that we are always thinking about how the various moments that constitute the school day and the students' lives play out in their learning? We need to explore how to make learning active and connected to the real world in ongoing ways. We need more prototypes like Outward Bound, Expeditionary Learning and High Tech High that put this type of experience at the very center of the learning experience. How can our schools toggle more in their programs between thinking and experiencing, learning and building, so as to make cognition active in wonderful ways?

Strong Bodies, Strong Minds

We also need to take a comprehensive approach to rethinking health and fitness. Schools do not spend enough time thinking

about the health of their constituents. Teachers and students get too little sleep and the effects of sleep deprivation are debilitating, as Professor Matthew Walker explained in a recent TED talk. Schools can be very stressful places that offer few opportunities to decompress during the school day. How can we bring a more positive attitude to being in school and doing school work?

In the late 1990s, Martin Seligman coined the term “positive psychology.” His aim was to flip psychology on its head so that researchers and clinicians would know as much about building positive functioning as they do about remediating dysfunction. Over the last decade, a global movement has sought to bring social-emotional learning, character strengths, purpose development and “positive education” to the fore. Although this would seem sensible, there are many forces that fight against such a movement, including a misplaced emphasis on “rigor” in secondary schools and an ever more stressful college admission process. Many students feel estranged by the “systems” that our schools have become. We know through David Yeager’s research that “belonging” is essential to good learning. We know that self-control and curiosity can be taught and developed, but we do not create school environments that build such capacities in our students. We know from Bill Damon’s research that having a sense of purpose leads to students thriving, and yet, many of our students can feel purposeless even though they achieve a lot.

In fact, we may be doing the opposite; we go for quick wins rather than the deeper rewards of perseverance. We know that good learning is social and community-based, and still we put a premium on individual achievement. We need more communities of learning where learning is intergenerational, fosters empathy and embraces diversity. This demands a radical rethinking of our schools on a grand scale. There are schools and groups of schools such as Australia’s Positive Education Schools Association that currently are thinking more about “positive education” and what that could look like. How can we bring the issue of mental and physical well-being of students closer to the core of our work in schools?

Grappling Leads to Growth

If you ask people about “the future,” they summon up images of the Jetsons or Apple commercials ... worlds of digital convenience. It all seems so sleek, so frictionless. Certainly, much of Silicon Valley and the products and platforms it produces have, as a main aim, convenience and ease. Software becomes ever more intuitive and user-friendly.

However, where learning and development are concerned, friction, “desirable difficulty” and grappling are much better ways of encouraging growth, as psychologists Elizabeth and Robert Bjork have discovered. We learn more by collision than compliance. We become more independent when taking the risk to demonstrate agency and step out of our comfort zone. How can we make discomfort something to be embraced? It is interesting to see the return of Stoicism, since that seems to point to some desire to find meaning and purpose through struggle rather than convenience. And yet, many of our assumptions about our lives and our education are based on making the lives of ourselves and our children easier. It is interesting to see if we can reframe “struggle” as worthwhile for our children and how we can support that type of struggle. We need to tolerate more friction, more difficulty for our children, so that they can gain the most from their learning experiences. How can we make struggle positive?

Real Communities

Our schools are all communities. Sometimes, they can be rather odd or ephemeral communities, but nonetheless, they are communities. Do we think of schools *deeply* as communities? The “systems thinking” and “widget” language of MBA programs have taken a toll on our schools. Education is not a system. It is a very human and creative process. We need to bring more of that humanity back to the fore: Learning is dialogic. It is certainly fine to talk about educational outcomes and learning goals, as long as we do not lose sight of the very human and very messy process that we are engaged in.

We all need to consider what types of communities we are and what are our deepest held values. In a world where values can be seen as context- or person-dependent, it is more and more important for us to enunciate the human values that are our compass for our daily steps and for our longer journeys. These discussions are not simple, nor are they easy, but defining more clearly what our institutions stand for is essential in this age. How inclusive, diverse and equitable are we really? How globally competent do we want our students to be and what are we doing about it? Do all students understand that they belong in our schools? How can we do a better job of crafting our communities, of designing our environments, to meet our aspirations while being as brave as possible?

Let's Redefine Measurement

We can tap into cognitive science, make learning more experiential, focus on students' mental and physical health, encourage children to grapple with life, engage our school communities in thoughtful dialogue ... all of these are essential. But what does it matter if there is no way to measure our growth over time? If our success as a parent or employee were measured by a single grade or by a page of grades, many of us would be outraged. If we were only measured by one dimension of our endeavors in the world, we would feel diminished. If we were just given a score at the end of a task and never given an opportunity for feedback and revision, many of us would feel that would be unfair.

These issues are a plague upon our schools, on education globally, and on how we treat potential in youth. Just as President Kennedy called upon the United States to figure out how to explore in space, we need a movement to figure out how we provide feedback to young people on their development and measure their growth over time so they can figure out the patterns that make up their learning and development. From that, they would be able to determine their best futures. We need to understand the cognitive wilderness that exists and grows within us all.

Currently, measurement in education is mainly focused on ranking and benchmarking rather than on formative ongoing feedback. We are focused on judgment rather than feedback, and that makes it much harder for us to grow our skills, our knowledge, and our capacities. What does the Fitbit for learning and development look like? At the same time, the world of credentialing in education is broken. The high school transcript is not a very good representation of learning or personal development. It is good to see that universities and high schools are starting to recognize this. Southern New Hampshire University/LRNG and the Mastery Transcript Consortium are two organizations thinking about how to credential real-life experiences. We need to develop much more nuanced and sophisticated systems of feedback and credentialing that could, perhaps, last our entire lifetime. We also need to develop systems that manage to credential the capacities that seem not possible to credential: e.g., how we collaborate with others, our ability to empathize with others, or our developing sense of optimism.

Can We Weave Together?

The many questions posed in these six areas are complex. It is good to see schools endeavoring to answer them, but also it is discouraging to see how little collaboration or integration there is across the various domains of education. We need more collective efficacy: when individuals work together as a team and share the belief that their joint efforts will produce positive results, they become more effective.

How often do kindergarten teachers and 12th-grade teachers collaborate in most schools? How often do university leaders and faculty members gather constructively with their secondary-school colleagues? Why does it so rarely occur that charter, independent and public-school educators find time to work together on purposeful projects that seek to improve education at scale? How much do we know about or explore global trends in education? Just as at the school level, we need to horizontally articulate our aims to make all of our schools better

for our children. We need inspiration from leaders like social entrepreneur Ben Hecht and consultants John Kania and Mark Kramer, who argue for a gathering of forces from different sectors to solve large-scale problems.

We need that “weft,” that type of collective efficacy involving schools, universities, nonprofits, governmental agencies and corporations to help develop prototype solutions for schools across the nation and the world. I hope that we will find the wherewithal, the collective effort, and the focus to develop solutions that will improve learning, bring more experiential activities to our schools, help the well-being of our students, let us be more tolerant of young people as they grapple with their work and development in good ways, find ways to deepen the sense of belonging in our communities, and construct the type of human assessments that will make our learning and our world better. I hope we can weave a better learning fabric for our futures.

Dominic A.A. Randolph is Head of School at Riverdale Country School, a school for pre-K through 12th-grade students in the Bronx.