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Focusing on Performance: The Intangibles of Winning in Schools

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New York Daily News reporter Anthony McCarron, and other members of the aggressive New York sports media, got a surprising response from Derek Jeter, the shortstop for the New York Yankees, when they peppered him with a series of questions about his sluggish numbers at the beginning of the 2002 season. Jeter's numbers were below his normal averages and, in response to questions about them, Jeter gave the following response,

I don't care about those numbers as long as I win. There are ways to win that you don't get numbers for. If you hit a ground ball to move a guyover from second to third, and then the next guy hits a ground ball and gets an RBI, you don't hear about the guy who moved the runner over. I'mhitting second, and some of those other [big-named shortstops] are batting third. Part of my job is moving guys over and scoring runs (Jeter inKuehl, Kuehl, & Tefertiller, 2005, p. 64).

In many ways, those of us in education are in a similar position as Jeter. We are continually barraged with questions about our low numbers. Student performance, we are told, is consistently declining and teachers, administrators, and colleges of education are not doing nearly enough to improve it. For example, the Alliance for Excellent Education reported that most businesses indicate that about half of recent high school graduates lack skills in oral and written communication, as well as problem-solving, and critical thinking skills (Alliance, AdolescentLiteracyFactSheet.pdf). Furthermore, the 2005 ACT College Readiness Benchmark for Reading discovered that only about one-half of high school students were ready to read at the college level (Gallagher, 2010). Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education, contends that nearly 1.2 million students in the United States either drop out or do not complete high school on time, and about one-half of students of poverty drop out of school. From virtually every angle of the educational picture, the state of affairs is dreary. In short, the numbers look sluggish – certainly below what is expected of an industrialized nation.

Unlike Derek Jeter, most in the field of education have relied on only the numbers to indicate "winning." Student performance on standardized exams and statewide assessments have become the measures of success for students, teachers, schools, and communities. This begs the question, however, whether other factors influence student performance on high-stakes tests. To be sure, like professional athletes in games, student performance on exams is an important indicator of success. How well Derek Jeter plays in a game is critical to his success as a baseball player, and in many respects determines how he is perceived by his teammates, his coaches, and the over-bearing New York sports media. There is no question that, when he consistently drives in the winning run, or cracks a homerun to win the game, he deserves the nickname "captain clutch." Yet, his message that numbers only tell part of the story of winning is instructive to a field that has become obsessed with numbers and results.

If there are multiple factors involved in winning, or performing well on the field or on a standardized exam, then we as educators need to investigate their potential use in the classroom and in schools. Research in psychology and business over the past twenty years challenges the prevailing view in education that cognitive abilities, innate talent, and leadership style are primary influences on performance. Furthermore, research indicates that objective indicators, such as numbers, reveal only

part of an individual's overall performance. They include the areas of Emotional Intelligence (EQ), Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and Mental Toughness (MT). Research in these areas is instructive in how educators and administrators can work with students, teachers, and staff to build a culture of winning that includes both the numbers and the other ways you "don't get numbers for."   Although more research needs to be done in schools to investigate the ways intangibles such as emotions, pro-social behavior, and mental toughness impact a student's performance, much of the work in these areas strongly encourages educators to expand their understanding of performance.

Emotional Intelligence (EQ)

Daniel Goleman's book *Emotional Intelligence* (1994) brought the notion of EQ into the mainstream. He argues that emotional intelligence (EQ) is a stronger indicator of success in business and in school than cognitive ability. Emotionally intelligent individuals, in general, are able to perceive the emotions of others, understand and manage their emotions, and use their own emotions and those of others to produce successful results. He states that it is not so much what we do when we perform, but how we approach the performance. Thus, a student's ability to work consistently, possess impulse control, approach school with a positive attitude, persevere through obstacles, acquire confidence, and learn from mistakes and failures are more important, or potentially greater indicators of success in school, than one's "innate" cognitive intelligence.

Business consultants have expanded on Goleman's work by working directly with companies to improve their productivity. Freedman (2007) illustrates that businesses that have developed more soft skills, such as EQ, in their workforce have seen dramatic improvements. Emotions are assets that individuals can use to their benefit. For example, he claims that employees at Pepsi Co. who received EQ training had a 10% increase in productivity, had an 87% decrease in executive turnover, and had an added economic value of $3.75m than the ones who did not (p. 65). To manage one's emotions, he developed the Six Second EQ Model, which consists of " Know yourself, Choose yourself, and Give yourself" (p. 89). Although it is presented in a chart, it is a recursive process – know, choose, give, know, choose, give, etc. Each step is described below:

Six Second EQ Characteristic	Explanation
Know Yourself	Identify emotions and recognize patterns
Choose Yourself	Recognize options in situation and act intentionally
Give Yourself	Develop empathy for others and align yourself with a larger purpose or goal

Freedman's model of Emotional Intelligence could be used in schools in several ways. For teachers, they could use this model in their classroom management and procedures, helping students to set larger goals for themselves, understand that they have several ways to behave in a given situations, and to develop empathy for others, which creates a safe-learning environment. Administrators,

similarly, could incorporate this model throughout their schools. In addition to looking at numbers on standardized exams, administrators could develop larger goals for the school that encompass both cognitive and emotional goals, which influence how well a student performs in school. In essence, we need to look at the ways that students perform that they "don't get the numbers for" so that they can get the numbers they want.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Researchers in the field of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) build on the work of EQ, yet include characteristics that are more germane to schools. In addition to identifying, perceiving, and managing emotions, SEL includes being motivated, controlling impulses, following directions, expressing needs, and getting along with others. McCombs (2004) defines SEL in the school context as the "process for integrating thinking, feeling, and behavior to achieve important social tasks; meet personal and social needs; and develop the skills necessary to become a productive, contributing member of society."

Recent research from CASEL (Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) on the impact of SEL in schools indicated that schools with an SEL focus had lower absenteeism and drop-out rates, and that K-8 students across demographics and various environments (e.g. rural, urban, suburban) saw an increase of 11-17 percentile points on test scores (Payton, J., Weissberg, R.P., Durlak, J.A., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., Schellinger, K.B., & Pachan, M., 2008). In addition, a meta-analysis of 207 studies conducted by Weisberg (2007) of the impact of SEL programs on schools showed that schools with an SEL focus demonstrated noticeable improvements in student academic achievement, attitudes about themselves and others, and decreases in negative emotions, such as stress and aggression, and disruptive classroom behaviors. Researchers in this area have developed school-wide SEL programs for principals, and continue to study the relationship between SEL and school culture and academic performance, as well as continue to investigate strategies for incorporating SEL into specific content areas.

Intangibles of Performance: Mental Toughness

How do less talented players have successful careers in professional sports? How do some players excel in pressure situations while others wither? Why do talented players remain mediocre and fade into obscurity while others rise to superstar status? Many of us in schools recognize these questions, although they appear in a different form. They may go something like this: why do students who complete mediocre work in class receive high scores on standardized exams? Why do some students "freeze-up" on timed-tests while others do not? Why do some students excel in school while others do not? These are just a few of the questions that researchers in sports psychology are currently trying to answer. Most of the research in this area shows that what separates good from great players, from those who become hall of fame players and those do not, is Mental Toughness (MT).

MT, in general, is the ability to motivate oneself, even in the face of adversity, to perform at optimal levels in order to provide oneself with the best opportunity to succeed (see fig. 1 for summary). Athletes who are mentally tough are able to keep their emotions in tact when events in the game go against them, they are able to stay calm in pressured situations, tap into an inner strength to battle back from failure and setbacks, and are able to be flexible to adjust to the situations in a game. In addition, mentally tough athletes are disciplined, avoid distractions, work hard to grow both physically and mentally strong, refuse to take the easy way out, push themselves to be the best, think of challenges

as a opportunities for personal growth, and instead of avoiding the challenge, they plan for how to effectively confront it. Finally, and perhaps most important, they bounce back quickly from disappointment and adversity, they overcome fear, and accept no excuses of themselves or others around them.

Mental toughness separates the professional athletes from everyone else . As Karl Kuehl, John Kuehl and Casey Tefertiller (2005) write in their seminal work on this topic, "Enormously talented athletes wash out because of a lack of desire or a breakdown of mental toughness. Far less talented players find their way to the major leagues for long and successful careers because of their mental toughness" (p. 6). What is important about mental toughness is that it is a skill that can be taught and nurtured.

Fig. 1 MTQ48 (Clough, Earle, & Sewell, 2002) subscales.

Characteristic	Description
Challenge	Views problems as opportunities for personal development, and thrives in changing environments
Commitment	Perseverance, and being deeply involved in what one is doing
Emotional Control	Self-monitors emotions; doesn't let emotions determine performance
Life control	Believes s/he is relevant to environment
Confidence in abilities	Optimistic; less concerned about external factors
Interpersonal confidence	Assertive in social situations; less intimated by others

In schools, this means that students who are able to adjust their learning strategies, persevere through difficult material, control their emotions during pressure situations, such as timed exams or standardized exams, remain in optimal mental and physical condition, and prepare properly are more likely to exhibit MT. They are more likely to perform better than those who do not have a high degree of MT. Students who see challenges as opportunities for personal growth are more likely going to willingly confront it, learn from mistakes, and be successful. Furthermore, MT athletes prefer leaders who are focused on training and instructional behaviors, rather than building a social support system for athletes, or ones who exhibit democratic behaviors, autocratic behaviors, or provide positive feedback (Crust & Azadi , 2009). Athletes with high mental toughness are more likely to prefer a coaching style that is task-focused and less likely than one that provides an opportunity to participate in decision-making. What this research means for schools and for teaching and learning is that students who have a high level of MT will prefer teachers who focus on improving their skills and giving them strategies to improve their skills rather than on providing praise, or granting them decision-making power in the

classroom. MT teachers remain focused on the larger goals of the school and their students, welcomed new strategies to improve their teaching, and confront obstacles directly.

An important factor in MT athletes is how they deal with set-backs, losses, and failures. How do mentally tough athletes make adjustments to their game in order to improve their performance? Interestingly enough MT athletes rarely focus on the results. They focus on the elements of their game that they can control, specifically the planning, approach, and process of playing the game. Baseball players with high MT understand that much of the game is unpredictable. For example, Derek Jeter could dive for a ball, throw to first, and the base-runner could still be called "safe." The umpire could have made a bad call, the runner could have beaten out the throw. Either way, mentally tough athletes do not focus so much on the result (i.e. the runner called safe-ruled a base hit), but on his or her approach to the play. More important, when players make a mistake, get into a slump, or fail, they zero-in on the parts of their game that they can control, and not so much the results. This does not mean, however, that mentally tough athletes do not set goals, but they set goals that are within their control. Results and goals are very different. In the example above, Jeter's goal may have been to get in front of every ball that came to him, but his result was the base runner being called "safe." He reached his goal without relying on the result. This is an important distinction in education because we focus so much on results.

Conclusion

What is it that we have within our control that can improve student performance in schools? We can provide them with competent, emotionally intelligent, mentally tough teachers and administrators who provide students with a safe, positive learning environment. We can examine ways to integrate emotional intelligence, social-emotional learning, and mental toughness into our curriculum so that students perform well on high-stakes tests, but learn to persevere, exhibit empathy, and get along with others during the school day and after they graduate. We can think of schools as a practice field for students to acquire cognitive abilities, emotional capacities, and mental toughness to be successful in school and in life. We can provide task-oriented, instructional 'coaching' or teaching to build confidence in students. We can help students deal with failure and disappointment by focusing on the process, the planning, and approach to a task instead of making the final score (number) mean everything. We can use curriculum to model how to use emotions productively, how to perceive the emotions of others to encourage cooperation, and how to develop pro-social behaviors that support a safe learning environment. Numbers and results matter in schools just like they do in sports, but they only tell part of the story. If we focus too much on the numbers, and let them drive the curriculum and school decision-making process, we may forget important factors that could have a greater impact on performance than numbers.

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