
Book Review
Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence
by Daniel Goleman

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Our world and the information in it move at such an unimaginable rate of speed that some students struggle with focus and the knee-jerk reaction of the American pharmacological culture has been to rely on medication to improve focus. Daniel Goleman's *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence* recognizes the intensity of information overload and provides the foundation for a discussion of the impact this has on brain functionality. Goleman is an authority on issues concerning focus, an important topic to consider in curriculum design, development, and evaluation.

This review is filtered on the impact focus has on teacher preparation, pedagogy, and how our students learn. Goleman highlights the relationship between the powers of attention with resulting excellence. Goleman believes that when we attune to inner, other, and outer foci, we can find a balance that ensures fulfillment. Inner focus refers to self-awareness and matters of intuition, other focus to interpersonal relationships, with outer focus meaning our external interactions. As educators employ the three-pronged attention approach to curriculum design and development, increases in student engagement and learning are automatic.

Throughout *Focus*, Goleman intersects the brain science of attention with relatable, everyday situations. He covers topics such as the anatomy of the brain regarding attention centers, awareness of self and others, exercising the brain effectively, and how all of these elements coincide to create excellence in leadership. Goleman's work is

transferable between the education and corporate sectors and he provides a plethora of resources for further investigation.

Preparing Teachers

One of the best notations Goleman made in *Focus* is understanding that students are not always attention deficit but rather, attention split. Due to sensory overload, the brain will switch focus as if we are toggling between two or more computer screens. The challenge is that of “continual switching saps attention from full, concentrated engagement” (p. 34). Goleman describes these functions as top and bottom, and illustrates the turmoil between the two throughout *Focus*. Goleman explains that the lower, bottom brain is where intuition and impulse reside and the upper, top brain is where effort and self-control are found.

Goleman explains distraction types as sensory and emotional. Student teachers would also benefit from recognizing these to improve the design of classroom environments and acknowledge distractions students bring with them into that environment. Goleman also posits that the essence of learning is found through reflection and as long as distractions exist, reflection is trivial and learning is limited. Continuing, Goleman refers to teachers’ need for students as early as kindergarten to be ready to sit and learn quietly. This is a willpower-driven skill he calls executive functioning where self-discipline, attention control, and temptation resistance are handled.

According to Goleman, self-control is found in the upper, top brain, whereas succumbing to temptation and impulse activates another area where the brain registers reward and pleasure. He suggests, “The greater the demands on our attention, it seems, the poorer we get at resisting temptation” (p. 134). The over scheduling of the public school day, crowded classrooms, and prescribed curriculum present an abundance of distractions.

Teaching Students

Under Goleman’s theories of focus, students are inundated with sensory distraction overload and are not afforded time to examine emotional distractions to foster an opportunity for deep learning. Goleman reports on the Inner Resilience Program implemented in response to the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing impact on neighboring schools. The program’s goal was to help students and teachers regain their composure after the attacks. Offering students a place to cool down or instituting a time in their day that allows for deep breathing and quiet is tremendously impactful on attention and focus.

There is great benefit to being systems aware, self-aware, and empathetic. Self-awareness, as Goleman's specialty, has everything to do with emotional intelligence. Goleman refers to this as wayfinding manifested through "subtle murmurs within that can help guide our way through life," (p. 96).

Focus for Learning

Goleman describes the areas of the brain pertaining to learning, and more aptly, "sustained concentration and immersion" (p. 31), which is regularly interrupted by fast-paced learning environments. Our brain consists of hooks and as we engage in learning activities, such as reading, our brain latches new bits of information to pre-existing hooks. When distraction occurs, those hooks are left dangling with no new insight attached. The antidote is finding the "flow," as Goleman calls it. The place where people are enthralled by what they are doing or learning.

Concluding Remarks

Goleman makes the case that educators would benefit from reconsidering the current paradigm for curriculum through a greater understanding of attention and brain functions that leads to excellence. Goleman intersected these concepts of attention and excellence in an effort to illustrate the works of great leaders. This intersection also applies significantly to excellence in the classroom lead by great teachers. Goleman's writing is relatable to multiple audiences; however, it might help to have some knowledge of psychology to adequately grasp the details of brain functions provided throughout. In conclusion, the brain functions that are most relevant to educators are the top versus bottom brain turmoil, capitalizing on our natural ability for systems thinking, recognizing the two types of distractions as sensory and emotional, and then interweaving these into every aspect of curriculum. Ultimately, reflection is what we need the most and never make time for. Reflection and breathing afford us the opportunity to reset and refocus. It is in the refocus that we can change our paradigms and increase our chances at learning exponentially.

Information on Book

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2013. New York, NY: Harper. ISBN 0062114867