A Message from the Head of School

The Foundation for Achieving Everything You Want for You and Your Children:

Perceiving Issues with Clarity and Focus

By Robb Gaskins, Ph.D.

If you are a parent, what is it you want for your children more than anything else? Take a moment to reflect on that question before reading further. A recent survey of 5,550 parents from 16 countries asked this same question (HSBC, 2015). What do you think they found? Taken together, the results indicated that parents' deepest desires for their children were that they would experience happiness, good health, financial security, career success, and fulfillment of their potential.

Those are laudable goals and I imagine they match your response quite closely. As educators and parents, these goals beg the question: If we want our children to realize these outcomes, what is it we need to teach them more than anything else? I would argue that we need to teach them clarity and focus.

To be sure, I recognize that is a bit of an unexpected answer. Without question, there are many essential qualities, concepts, and strategies that are mentioned far more prominently in the educational literature related to children's success in school and life. So, why do I propose clarity and focus? I propose them because clarity and focus establish the foundation for everything else.

The Importance of the Foundation

When I speak of clarity and focus, I define them as follows:

- **Clarity**—The perception of our experience with a minimum of filters (preconceptions, expectations), distraction (sensory, emotional, or cognitive), and entanglements (attachment, judgment) toward the end of being fully present in the current moment and open to possibilities.

- **Focus**—Sustained attention where we intentionally direct it.

I consider these two qualities fundamental to optimal functioning because, before we activate our conceptual frameworks, establish our motivation for a task, engage our curiosity, apply our cognitive strategies, activate our social and emotional knowledge, and/or consciously exercise our executive skills, our current state of mind determines how we do all of these things. Further, I would argue that the two main characteristics that distinguish our current state of mind are our clarity and ability to focus.

Consider two different individuals preparing to watch a political debate. The first has had a long and challenging day that has left him tense, agitated, and continuing to ruminate over specific events in the day. He strongly favors a particular candidate and is deeply invested in supporting that person's candidacy. The second viewer also has had a long and challenging day and favors a particular candidate. Upon arriving home, he takes a sustained bike ride and engages in a relatively short period of mindful breathing. As he sits down to watch the debate, he cannot help but hold the beliefs about the candidates he has formed to this point, but there is no strong attachment to these ideas. His mind is quiet, attuned, and open to the arguments and evidence that will be presented. Do you think these individuals will perceive the debate similarly or differently?

It is likely that they will perceive the debate quite differently, and I submit to you that the differences are due to their state of mind heading into the debate. Without clarity and focus, our minds are not fully engaged in the task at hand and our perceptions tend to be channeled into the mental ruts that we have established over time. Negative thoughts only exacerbate the problem by concurrently working to narrow our attention. The result of a lack of clarity and focus is that we are less likely to recognize the rich assortment of information and possibilities available in the current moment, thereby limiting our perceptivity, creativity, and adaptability, all of which are qualities associated with successful performance and contentment.

Building the Foundation

So, how do we develop clarity and focus? There are many facets of the Benchmark instructional program directed at the development of clarity and focus. In what follows, I will provide a brief overview of some of those components using an organizational framework presented by Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence* and founder of the movement for social and emotional learning, and Peter Senge, organizational learning and systems thinking expert at MIT and author of *The Fifth Discipline*.

To develop clarity and focus that will enable us to thrive in a complex world, we need to concentrate on three areas (Goleman, 2013; Goleman & Senge, 2014):

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1. **Self**—As Socrates suggests in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, our highest priority is to "know thyself." The same is true in the present context. For students to achieve clarity and focus, they must come to understand themselves. As such, from the time students enter Benchmark School to the time they graduate, we help them understand who they are; the open canvas of who they can become; the factors that shape their thoughts, feelings, and actions; the qualities that facilitate successful outcomes; the qualities that impede successful outcomes; how they are connected to the wider world; and how to take control of their thoughts, feelings, and actions in order to achieve their goals and flourish in life. As part of that instruction, they learn that their default minds are neither clear nor focused. However, by developing the aforementioned self–understanding, along with such qualities as reflectivity, open–mindedness, and mindfulness awareness, they can perceive the world with clarity and focus.

2. **Others**—Humans are social beings who actively seek to find their place in the groups to which they belong. There is strength, joy, and comfort to be found in harmonious communities. Being able to collaborate, cooperate, and form meaningful relationships are keys to functioning successfully in a group. To achieve these ends, we must learn to tune in to one another, listen mindfully, and empathize, which are other–directed forms of clarity and focus. These skills require the recognition that others have their own thoughts, feelings, opinions, and motives that must be understood and appreciated if we are to interact successfully.

3. **Outer**— We often consider ourselves to be discrete entities that can be separated from the broader context, when in fact we have no meaning (nor can we survive) apart from the whole (Gaskins, 1999). Similarly, we have a tendency to perceive the human experience from an event–orientation as opposed to a systems–orientation (Richmond, 1991). With an event–orientation, the world is a collection of distinct events with simple causes and effects. When there is a problem, you identify the specific cause, fix it, and move on to the next event. With systems–orientation, the world is a network of related moments that reflect the influence of interdependent elements. When there is a problem, you work to understand the elements that are converging to cause the problem, then you take action to change the way the elements are interacting so that they are no longer creating feedback loops that cause the problem.

As an example, let's say a new student is bumped from behind by a second student running past him on the playground. The new student runs after the second student and pushes him hard. The second student steadies himself and shakes his head as he fumes, "What's your problem?!" before walking away. A teacher with an event–orientation would focus on addressing the immediate behavior she witnessed from the new student. Across the course of the year, she would likely reinforce her behavioral expectations and the classroom culture she seeks to create with all of the students. If a consistent pattern of physical behavior emerged for the new student, she might conclude that the underlying cause is that the child is simply aggressive and unwilling or unable to change. A teacher with a systems–orientation would certainly address the immediate behavior she witnessed on the playground, but her focus would be on developing an understanding of the elements and feedback loops that caused the behavior. Across the course of the year, she would help all of the students in her class develop an understanding of the elements and feedback loops that typically shape behaviors during social interactions so that they could learn to develop control over their actions. Beyond that, she would help them apply systems thinking across contexts and subject areas. If a consistent pattern of physical behavior emerged for the new student, she and the rest of the instructional team would provide individual guidance to help the student understand the specific elements and feedback loops that seemed to be leading to his particular pattern of behavior so that he could learn to take control of his actions. This systems–oriented approach is consistent with what we do at Benchmark School.

To be sure, systems thinking presents greater complexity, but, ultimately, it also presents greater clarity about how the world works and that clarity will lead to a deeper understanding of issues and more meaningful and productive actions. Children today will face tremendously complex social, political, economic, and environmental issues. Teaching them to apply systems thinking will help prepare them to address these challenges.

Summary

We all have lofty goals for our children and we want to insure that they have the tools to attain those goals. There are many concepts, strategies, and characteristics that are necessary to achieve those outcomes, but I believe none of them are more important than the development of clarity and focus. They are the foundation of everything our students need to know. That is why clarity and focus are at the heart of all we do at Benchmark School.

References

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