

# Quality Education News

Tel: 012-349-5006 ♦ Fax: 012-349-1232 ♦ [www.saqi.co.za](http://www.saqi.co.za)

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Dear Supporter of Quality Education



**“Concentrate, please!”**

In our own school careers, it's highly likely that teachers have told us to 'focus' or 'concentrate'. Dandapani Satgunasingam, an author and international speaker, often asks his audiences, “Has anyone told you to concentrate?” The resounding response from the thousands of listeners is, “Yes!”. His listeners often add the words, “All the time!” (Satgunasingam:146-7).

Dandapani goes on to ask another question, “When you were in school, did you have daily formal hour-long classes on learning how to concentrate, the same way you had classes on Maths, Science, History and so on?” Not a single person has ever answered, “Yes.”

Countless children have been told by their teachers to concentrate in class. However, the learners are never taught how to do so. This inability to concentrate or focus has negative consequences. The most obvious one is scholastic underperformance. Another negative consequence is that there are those teachers and parents who rush to find medical solutions to solve children's inattentiveness.

Are there children who are incorrectly diagnosed with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)? Can children be helped to improve their ability to concentrate without medical intervention? The drug treatment of ADHD can have side effects such as poor appetites, irritability and sleep problems.

When children are taught how to concentrate and stay focussed, there could be no need for them to be treated for ADHD. There won't be a need for medical treatment. Before committing children to the ADHD treatment regimen, see if there's a simpler route.

If we have the ability to stay focussed whenever we listen, speak, think

or do something, there are huge advantages. Satgunasingam observes:

*The ability to focus is one of humanity's greatest assets. It is at the core of all human success and endeavour, because the ability to concentrate is what helps a person manifest their goals in life.*

Individuals who are filled with purpose and are focussed, achieve their goals. Think Herbert Baker and his inspirational architectural design for the Union Building in Pretoria. Think Nelson Mandela and his unwavering commitment to make South Africa a democratic non-racial society. Think Florence Nightingale and her relentless fights to radically improve the quality of hospital care for patients in the Crimean War. Focussed individuals achieve the exceptional.

So, how does one improve one's ability to focus when there are thousands of distractions all around us? The ideal is to train the mind to give full attention to one single activity at a time. Understandably, one cannot give full attention to everything that we do. An example could be a person's daily drive to and from work. The driver pays attention to driving properly but there are many distractions during the daily trip. Passengers in the car could be chatting and the driver is listening. The driver might glance at roadside billboard advertisements. The distractions are endless.

Wherever we put our focus, that's where our energy goes. When we're fully focussed on the task at hand, we give it all our energy. Yet if we're continually distracted, our energy flits from one activity to another. Our energy levels are weakened as our awareness and concentration are shared amongst so many distractions vying for our attention.

A teacher values the preciousness of teaching time. There's usually a huge curriculum to be covered in too little available time. Imagine your students walking into your classroom with a focussed mind frame. Imagine that everyone appreciates that there's work to be done. (Yes, dream on!) By the end of the lesson, there's the satisfaction that time has been spent optimally for everyone.

This newsletter shares ways to improve concentration and focus levels. These practical and timeless strategies, improve the quality of learning and teaching in every classroom.

Sincerely

Richard Hayward

#### References

Satgunasingam, D 2022. *The power of unwavering focus*. London: Transworld Publishers.



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# Starve your distractions. Feed your focus.

## Being focussed

The more one practises something, we get better at it. The pianist who diligently spends four hours a day for five days a week at the piano, is going to perform better than someone who spends half an hour or two, once or twice a week. The law of practice is a simple: the longer the duration of total focussed attention, the better the results.

If we would like to get a child – or ourselves - to improve the ability to be focussed, it can be done. Patience and time are two essentials. Add a third essential – small steps. There's great power in taking easy-to-manage small steps to achieve a huge goal. Gurudeva, a Hindu guru, made the observation that a temple made of bricks is built one brick at a time.

Start with focusing on activities of short duration and are done daily. Focus on daily rituals. For example, on the evening prior to the next school day, a child could spend focussed time packing the school bag and sports kit for the next day's activities. When the packing has been done in a focussed way, the child won't have forgotten to pack things the night before.

When there's focus, it's easier to deal with the daily challenges. In the case of the youngster preparing for what's needed the next day at school, he's making his school day a little easier. At school the next day he won't be anxious, fearful, stressed or worried that he's forgotten something at home.

After one or two daily tasks are being done with full awareness and concentration, add one or two more. Two further ones might be to daily make one's bed and polish school shoes. These daily add-on times of being focussed, increase the amount of time during the day when one is being fully focussed.

There's a tough challenge involved in being focussed. It's to stay focussed. That's achieved through willpower. A definition of willpower quoted by Satgunasingam (2022: 185) is, “ ... the channeling of all energies towards one given point for a given length of time.” Willpower can be described as a mental muscle. The more the muscle is used the stronger it becomes.

Three simple but highly effective methods to develop willpower are (*Ibid*:189):

- 1 Finish what you start;
- 2 Finish it well, beyond your expectations, no matter how long it takes;
- 3 Do a little more than you think you can.

Think of the child polishing her school shoes. She might not feel like doing it but there's no alternative. Simply do it. Don't cut any corners. She does it even a little better than she thinks she can. By the end of the task, she has made the polished shoes really shine.

*The shorter way to do many things is only to do one thing at a time.*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Maybe it's the 21<sup>st</sup> century that we live in. Maybe it's seen as a sign of superior intelligence. It's this supposed superior ability of a person to be able to multitask ... the ability to do two or more things at the same time.

You might, for example, want to speak to someone while they're busy on their laptop. That person tells you to speak while they continue with their fingers flying back and forth across the keyboard. They assure you that they're listening to every word. Not true. They might be hearing you but they cannot at the same time be listening intently. They're dividing their concentration and their focus between you and what's on the laptop screen.

Multitasking is a form of distraction. Our awareness flits from one task to another. Where our awareness goes, that's where our energy goes. The multitasker above is dividing her energy between listening to you and her typing. She bound to make a mistake or two on the laptop and not to understand clearly everything that you told the person.

Discourage multitasking in your classroom. What happens so often during a typical lesson is that many people are multitasking. Learners are listening to you or listening to their peers or taking notes from the Smartboard or doing Google research. Too much is happening all at once. Ideally, they should be doing one activity at a time.

Multitasking can have negative outcomes. The multitasker could have increased stress levels while trying to juggle different tasks. The quality of the work produced is lower to that of the person giving full concentration to one task at a time.

### Reference

Satgunasingam, D 2022. *The power of unwavering focus*. London: Transworld Publishers.

# Is modern technology the ultimate distraction?



We all have tales to tell of how the cellphone has become a distractor at meals and meetings. When technology intrudes, focus drifts away from the topic at hand.

The TV screen is another huge technological distractor. You switch on the TV to watch the news of the day but find that the screen is full of other distractions. There's the news anchor's face and alongside her are rolling pictures of the war in Ukraine. In the top right hand corner of the screen is today's temperature in New York with a flashing red light warning of flash floods expected in NYC over the next twenty hours. At the bottom of the screen is the rolling byline. You're told of protest strikes in Johannesburg, King Charles III arriving in Berlin on a State Visit and the newly-crowned world sheep shearing champion shearing in Auckland. How's it possible to absorb it all?!

Is modern technology a curse? Of course not. Our cellphone is an invention that has made our lives easier. We can talk and speak to anyone anywhere in the world; we can select and order food and have it delivered to the door. If we want the answer to any question, we can get an instant answer. The benefits are endless but with one proviso.

We shouldn't allow the smartphone or any other modern technology item be a form of mindless distraction. It shouldn't dictate who or what we think about. Nor should it be allowed to dilute our level of focussed attention. We should be in control. We shouldn't allow our awareness to drift along like a river brimming with countless red herrings of entertainment that technology presents to us.

How can we stop being lured into the appealing and endless distractions? Four suggestions offered are (Ibid: 222-224):

1 **Abstinence:** Stop unnecessarily turning to technology for entertainment. If you're a little bored, don't be tempted to switch on your smartphone or TV to see what's happening in your world. Go back to what you should be focussing on. It's called willpower!

2 **Purpose:** When using technology, use it with purpose. If you want to know the result of the match between Liverpool and Man United, switch on your smartphone to get the result. Once you've got the score, switch it off. Don't be tempted to watch a video replay of the goals that were scored during the match.

3 **Time:** Have specific times when you'll use the technology. In a classroom, for example, allocate a certain amount of time for learners to use the internet or use their cellphone. Once that time is up, switch off the devices. Allocate times during your day and evening when you'll use technology. Again, when the time is over, switch off.

4 **Focus:** Don't hop and jump from one topic to another. In the time that you've allocated for using technology, focus intensely on the subject that needs your attention. Don't be tempted to have a quick glance at something that looks interesting but that's not pertinent to the task at hand.



## Children and cyberbullying

One huge negative consequence of digital technology is cyberbullying. This happens when devices such as cellphones and the internet are used to trash others through gossip, hateful comments and spreading lies. It includes sending embarrassing photos and pornography.

Children can become become anxious, depressed and even suicidal through cyberbullying. What can be done to protect them from becoming victims? Parents and teachers can assure children that it's not their fault if someone is trying to bully them in this modern technology way. Praise the children for sharing such incidents with you. Together, you can beat these bullies.

Four practical steps to stop the cyberbullying are:

- Sign off from the computer;
- Don't respond or retaliate;
- Get your cell phone provider to block emails, messages or texts from these sources;
- Keep records of what was received and give them to the school and/or police.

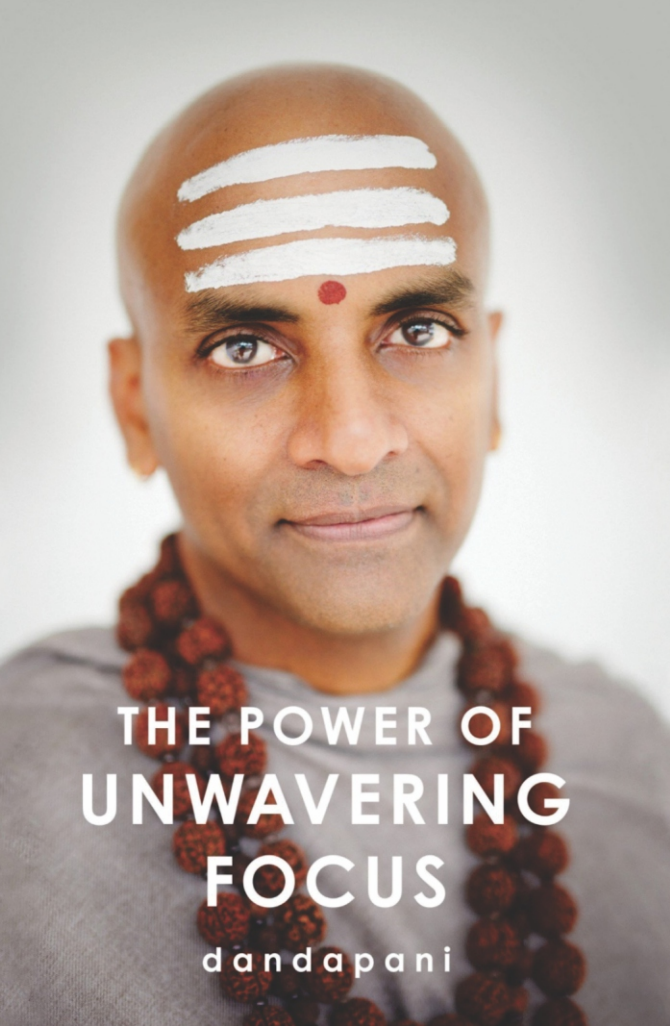
When modern technology is used selectively and sensibly, our lives are made more easy, enjoyable and safer.

## References

Satgunasingam, D 2022. *The power of unwavering focus*. London: Transworld Publishers.

<https://childmind.org/article/help-kids-deal-cyberbullying/>  
Accessed on 4 April 2023.





# Does this book belong in your staffroom library?

This definitely isn't the sort of book that's found in the traditional staffroom library. At first glance, the book might seem to have little relevance for a teacher. Yet browse through it with awareness and its' usefulness in a school becomes huge.

Dandapani Satgunasingam, the author, is a Hindu priest and former monk. After ten years in a monastery, he resigned and started out as an entrepreneur in New York City. Since 2008, he's become famous across the world as a public speaker. He has done training programmes with athletes, corporations and addressed audiences of thousands. The book is based not only on what he has learnt as a monk but also from his personal reflections on how to have a happy, purpose-filled life.

Every teacher has to contend with the student who lacks focus and concentration in the classroom. Every sports team coach knows the need to keep the player fully involved and not to 'drop the ball' at practices and games. If you ever have had to chair meetings such as for a department, governing body, parent association or the whole staff, you'll know the constant challenges of keeping chatty distractions at bay. You'll know the need for focus from everyone. The book shows how to achieve such goals.

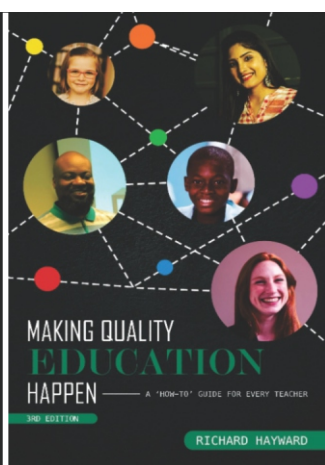
The book is brimful of absorbing anecdotes that link the book's teaching to daily life. Dabs of humour are found throughout the book. Dandapani explains how to overcome life challenges such as anxiety, fear, stress and worry. He writes in an easy-to-read style that's empathic and friendly.

Yes, this book isn't found in the typical school library. Yet the contents are pertinent not only in our professional role as a teacher in and outside the classroom. The contents are also relevant to our personal lives. So, does this book belong in your staffroom library? Definitely!

Satgunasingam, D 2022. *The power of unwavering focus*. London: Transworld Publishers. (Retail price: R 365)



The third edition of Richard Hayward's book, *Making Quality Education happen* – a 'how-to' guide for every teacher is on sale at Takealot for R 200. A kindle format at \$ 8.04 as well as a paperback colour edition for \$ 16.99 are available from Amazon. Smashwords sells the e-book format for \$ 6.99.



**SACE**  
South African Council for Educators  
*Towards Excellence in Education*

## Quality teachers are always learning

SACE has endorsed a number of SAQI (South African Quality Institute) workshops. The workshops earn CPTD points. The SAQI facilitator is Dr Richard Hayward, a former principal of two South African schools.

If you'd like more details about the topics and contents of the endorsed workshops, contact him on [rdphayward@yahoo.com](mailto:rdphayward@yahoo.com) or 011 888 3262. Disadvantaged schools are sponsored.