

WHAT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS CAN TEACH YOU ABOUT LEARNING AND HIGH PERFORMANCE

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The education system in the US often gets a bad rap. We complain endlessly about how we're falling behind, about how students aren't taught the right things, or how students are stuck in a classroom that doesn't look much different than a century ago. There may be some validity to those statements, but when you zoom in to the individual level, looking at what teachers do on a daily basis, you find that good teachers are actually at the forefront of the latest science and practice. Long gone are the days you remember from decades past. Good teachers are ahead of the game. If you want to learn about high performance, go watch a good teacher work with twenty or so six-year-olds.

For the past several years, I've observed my wife and many of her elementary school teaching colleagues, and even though I write books about performance, she likely knows more about the topic than me. I can't count the number of times I'll mention a fascinating new study on learning or behavior, and she'll reply, "Oh ya, that's like this thing we do in the classroom."

So let's dive into a few examples of lessons you might want to take away from first-grade teachers:

1. Take Breaks and Move

Long gone are the days where young students sit at their desks from dusk till dawn. Brain breaks, which often include a short dance party or time to get up and move around, are included periodically throughout the day. Research shows that it's not only the break which restores their cognitive and attention capacities but the movement itself that aids in learning.

When we move we enhance learning. It's why for learning certain concepts, modern teachers often tie various hand movements to the teaching of different sounds, phrases, or concepts. This research-backed idea should be familiar to anyone who has performed any sort of acting. Actors remember the lines much better if they practice their movement at the same time, rather than reciting their lines when sitting still.

Taken a step further, it is why many schools have pushed for a second recess. They recognize that it is not the number of minutes accumulated that determines learning, but the quality of those minutes. Physical activity boosts that quality tremendously. Research shows that after a short recess, kids are primed for learning. Recess boosts their executive function.

2. Allow Yourself to Fidget

In the world of sports, we're familiar with the idea that we need to find the right arousal state to perform at our best. Too hyped-up, and smooth movements become jittery. Too low, and we won't have the focus to carry us through. The same applies to learning.

My wife provides different seating options for her young students: from chairs to wobbly stools to cushions to sitting on the floor. The ADHD kids often choose the wobbly stools, so that they can rock back and forth, often subconsciously. For other students, she provides sensory stimulation items, small things with different textures for students to mess around with while they're sitting their chairs.

This may sound like a far cry from your elementary school days of sitting in a classroom, being told not to move. Yet, research, again, backs it up. Kids experiencing ADHD often are under-stimulated. They respond by fidgeting. Their legs rapidly tap in order to increase movement and physiological arousal. They are akin to the athlete who needs to get hyped to perform at their best.

Mindless fidgeting often has the same function as you or I taking a walk. It occupies just enough of our brain to free up and focus the other parts so that creative ideas can come to fruition.

3. Work, Rest, Vary.

Thinking back on our own experiences in school, we often have this perception that the teacher had a lesson, but then was kind of winging it. We may listen to her lecture, then do a worksheet or some other task. That couldn't be further from the truth. Teachers' days and lessons are meticulously designed, often down to the minute. They are keenly aware of how long students can focus, and zoom in and out from whole class to group to individual participation. They implement switching, to move from telling to engaging to doing. This ebb and flow of high concentration to switching tasks is designed to keep children engaged, to allow them to have multiple touch-points on learning a skill.

4. Care Deeply

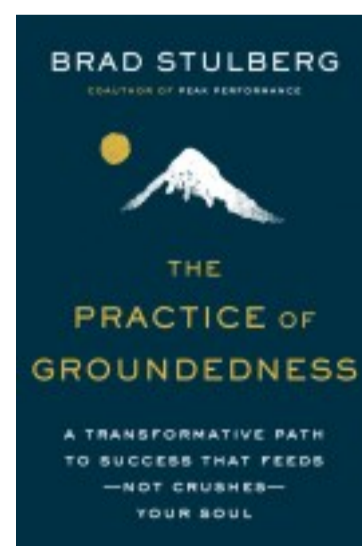
The key to learning, growing, and even performing at a world-class level is to show that you care. If you don't care, even the perfect curriculum or training plan won't matter. Beyond that, if you can create an environment that allows people to feel that they belong, that they can be themselves and not have to put on a mask, then you are freeing them up to perform to their maximum ability. I'd challenge anyone to find a group that shows caring and belonging better than elementary school teachers. You don't survive the rigors of a demanding profession with low pay unless you care a lot about the kids you are helping.

Now, maybe you could take away a thing or two from how elementary school teachers are helping to keep a bunch of wild and crazy six-year-olds on task, and learning. Yes, deep-focused work is important. But we can manipulate our environment to help us get there. Instead of recess, how about a mid-day walk? Are you taking a 'brain break' or mindlessly sitting at your desk for hours on end? Are you switching tasks, moving from singular focused work to group interaction, or just trying to 'grind' through it?

We often lament about education in this country. But in my experience, we all could learn a lot from how our elementary school teachers are engaging and educating our kids.

— Steve

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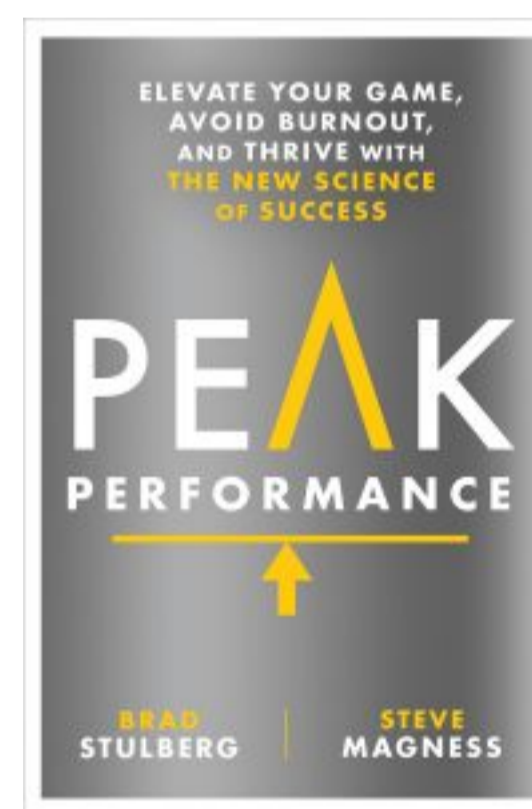
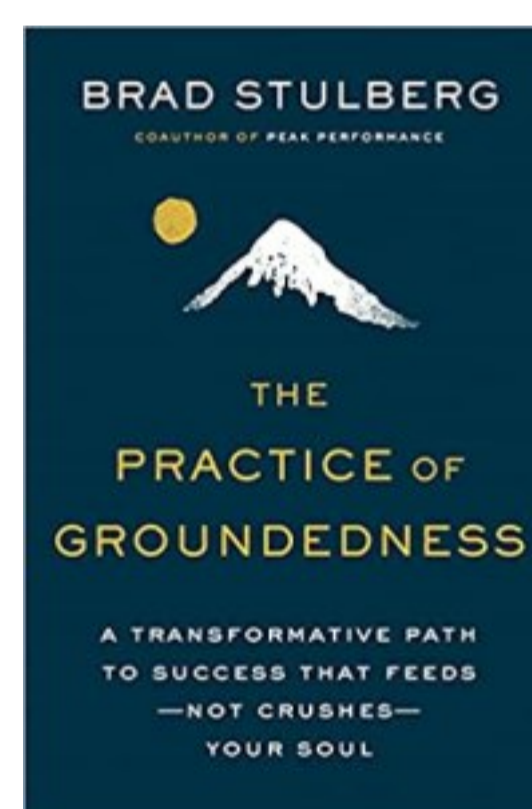
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