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A Source Of Distractions In The Classroom: The Teacher

LILY Y. S. WONG

Studies on characteristics of good teachers and qualities of effective teachers are plentiful. Strategies of good teaching have been studied again and over again. Although poor teaching or ineffective teachers have been included in passing, less have been mentioned about the teacher as a source of distraction in the learning process.

Teachers may be knowledgeable, well planned, and enthusiastic about teaching, but if they are insensitive to the likelihood of their being or becoming a source of distraction in the learning process, they can undermine all their zeal and preparation for successful teaching. This paper summarizes the data gathered from more than 100 teacher trainees who listed the distracting features of their teachers in retrospect. Most of the trainees were participants of the elective course entitled "The Teacher's Roles" and others were tutees in the foundation course. The trainees were asked to recall their learning experience as pupils in schools when their attention was on the individual teachers instead of on the learning task. Their experience and observation offer a guide to teachers who want to reflect and self-evaluate to perfect themselves as the model and facilitator in the learning-teaching process.

Teacher distracting factors are the aspects of the teacher which take away or minimise attention of the pupils from the lesson and focus it on the teacher. Teacher distracting factors include some of their irritating habits, improper attire and mannerisms which may amuse the pupils. An amusing factor can become distracting if it continues. For easy reference, the examples of distracting features of the individual teachers are listed into eight categories. Letters in brackets indicate whether such an example applies to male (M) or female (F) teachers, or to both (M & F).
Attire

squeaky shoes (M & F)       flimsy clothes (M & F)
body-hugging clothes (M & F) dusty shoes (M & F)
zsps not completely done       worn-out shoes (M & F)
(M & F)
too many unbuttoned buttons       heels too high (M & F)
(M & F)
flashy colour clothes (M & F)    wearing slippers (M & F)
plunging neckline (F)           high slits (F)
fanciful stockings (F)          cut-in armholes (F)
dropping off bra-straps (F)      petticoats which show (F)
very short skirts (F)
wearing no socks (M)           shirts not properly tucked (M)
bulging pockets (M)            infrequent change of pants (M)
dangling, cuffs of long sleeves (M)  pants too short (M)

Hair:

hair that keeps falling over face       constant flicking of hair (M & F)
(M & F)
hair covering the eye/eyes         unkempt hair (M & F)
(M & F)
dandruff (M & F)                  dirty and oily hair (M & F)
daily change of hairstyle (F)      fanciful hair-do (Afro style) (F)

Make-up:

strong perfume or lotion (M & F) strong natural odour (M & F)
glossy lipsticks (F)                nails too red (F)
heavy eye shadow (F)                excessive make-up (F)
fluttering eye-lids/lashes (F)
Personal Appearance:

fingernails trimmed with dirt (M & F)
dirty toe nails (M & F)
unshaven face (M)

long finger nail(s) (M & F)

sleepy eyes (M & F)

Jewelry or Accessories:

long and swinging chains (M & F)
too many unnecessary rings (M & F)
big and unusual ear-rings (F)
constant change of jewelry (F)

chunky necklaces (M & F)
huge rings (M & F)
noisy bangles (F)
big cowboy belts (M)

Glasses:

dark tinted glasses which hide the eyes (M & F)
dropping spectacles (M & F)
glasses of 'extraordinary shape and size (M & F)

Habit and Mannerisms

frequent scratching of head (M & F)
constant rubbing of nose (M & F)
clearing throat frequently (M & F)
biting and licking lips constantly (M & F)
fondling watch or chain (M & F)

playing with hair (M & F)
sitting on table (M & F)
removing shoes (M & F)
picking nose (M & F)
breaking knuckles (M & F)
breaking chalk unnecessarily (M & F)  
shaking legs while sitting (M & F)  
playing with keys, coins or chalk (M & F)  
doodling on board (M & F)  
yawning without covering mouth (M & F)  
erkening of shoulders (M & F)  
sneezing without covering mouth & nose (M & F)  
walking around while talking to the class (M & F)  
walking to and fro non-stop while teaching (M & F)  
sitting on the teacher’s desk with legs crossed or wide open (F)  
pulling up trousers (M)  

**Verbal Habits**: Besides mispronouncing words and making grammatical errors, the excessive use of the following by both male and female teachers is annoying –

okay  
right  
hmm...  

alright  
you see  
understand  
you know  

Most of the above distractors do not pose serious problems to learning. But, if teachers want to maximize the attention of the pupils on the learning task, they should make conscious effort to eliminate first the source of distraction arising unintentionally and unconsciously from themselves. To ascertain whether or not they are the cause of inattentiveness, they can reflect, self-evaluate, and get a third person’s opinion. Experienced teachers who are well respected by most pupils and colleagues will tell you if you ask.