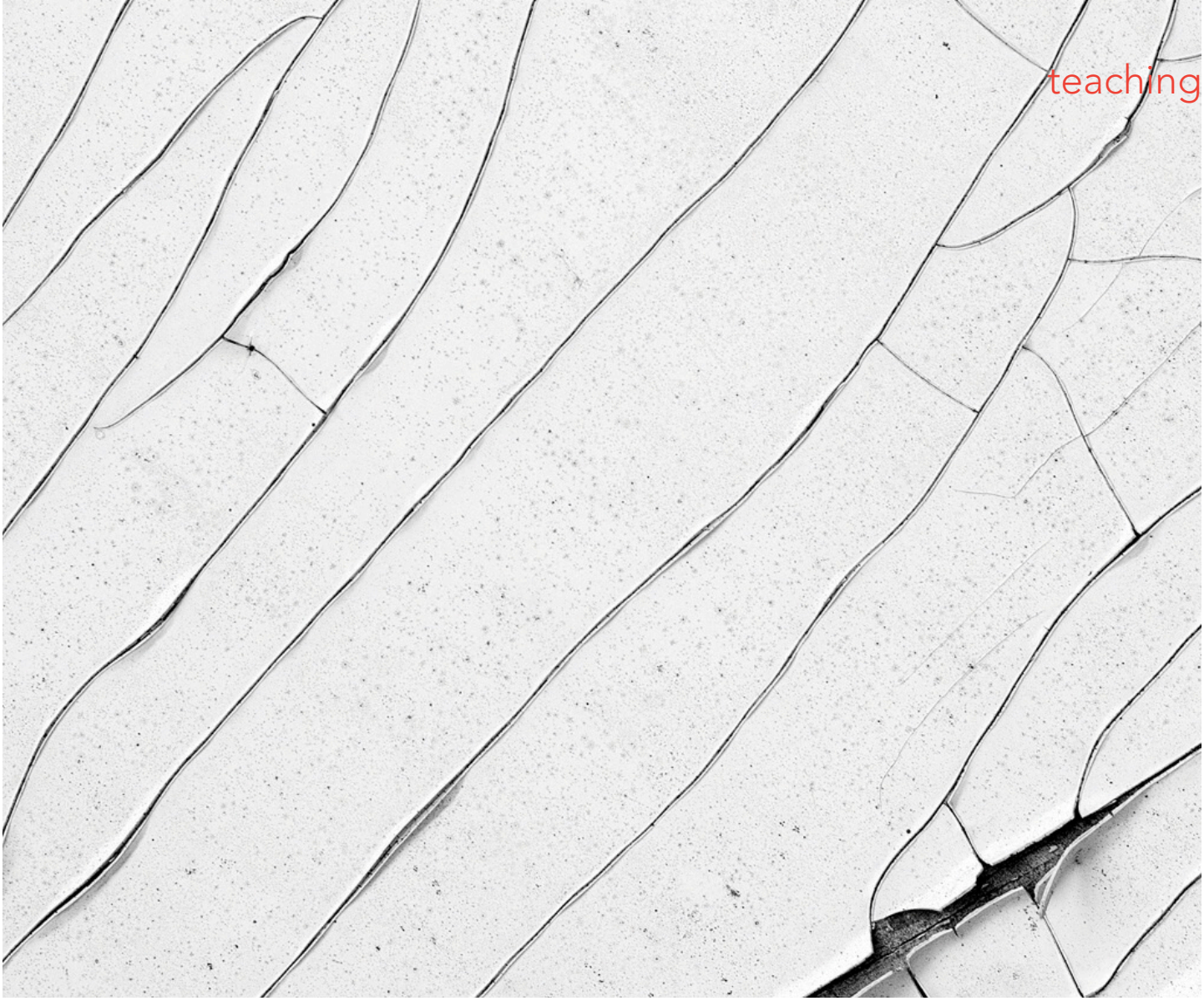

Teachers' bad habits

Dennis Sleigh

Everybody has some bad habits, no matter how saintly or proper they might appear to be. I've known nuns who swear, doctors who smoke, and choristers who sometimes sing off key. Sometimes the bad habits seem to plague not just individuals but also their colleagues. Used car salesmen have a reputation for turning back the odometer, politicians for being loose with the truth, athletes for using performance enhancing drugs, and so on, even though we all know upright salesmen, honest politicians, drug-free athletes. Just why these stereotypes seem to develop and adhere, no-one knows. In the case of teachers, however, it is easy enough to understand. After all, whenever old school chums get together for a reunion, their conversation invariably turns to the habits – real or imagined – of those who once taught them. Indeed, their teachers' habits are not merely recalled, they are reinforced, embellished and laughed over, so that they eventually become part of the remembered *persona* of the teacher. What hope is there for any objectivity in such a situation?

Those introductory comments do not imply that teachers are actually devoid of real flaws, for to do so would be to fly in the face of human nature. In fact, as I think of the question (do teachers have bad habits?), I have to respond with a resounding *Yes*. To make such an assertion is not to betray my erstwhile colleagues, my former chalked companions, nor is it to engage in professional slander. It is simply to acknowledge that despite their inherent goodness, even teachers do have some ever-so-slight imperfections. Since I have started to look at the issue, perhaps I should continue, and maybe get the angst out of my system.

What do teachers do wrong?

I'd like to start by stating that these views have been coloured by more than three decades in the principal's office and that the flaws recorded here are certainly not universal. Nevertheless, they have appeared often enough to make an impression on me. The first matter I would like to raise is the habit of some teachers to *forget our personal influence*.

The teachers I have in mind here are those whose connection with the school is twofold – they are both teachers and parents. Sadly, on leaving the school grounds, some of these people revert too quickly to the parent role. In exchanging pleasantries over the refrigerated goods section at the local supermarket, they forget that every word they say about the school to fellow parents will be analysed carefully and any slight departure from the 'official line' will be amplified. We might mention that the kids got on our nerves this afternoon (failing to add that they had to stay in for the third wet lunchtime in a row) but our message will be altered somewhat when it is repeated. "Mrs Murgatroyd said there is a discipline problem in the school, and she ought to know; after all, she teaches there." Poor Mrs M cannot really be

accused of disloyalty, but rather of naiveté. She has failed to realise that although she might see herself as 'just one of the parents', others see her as a representative of the educational authority. The damage done is unintended, but nevertheless quite real.

Another problem with teachers is that *we cannot stop talking*. I have watched accountants at conferences, doctors at conferences, clergy at conferences, and, I dare say, other groups too. None of them, I have to tell you, talk as much as teachers do while the presenter is delivering a paper. Even at school assemblies teachers do the same thing – knocking off from their chatter only long enough to tell their pupils to "stop that talking immediately or you will all be staying in at lunchtime". I don't know why we do it but I am afraid that it is a widespread fault. Some years ago, my daughter and I were studying for a Masters degree together and after the first few lectures, she said to me on the way home "Dad, do you realise that you never stop talking during lectures?"

I know that not all teachers, or even a majority, are like this, but it is a common enough failing for us to have a reputation as a less-than-desirable group to work with, according to circuit speakers I know.

A third fault that leaps to mind is that *teachers have favourites*. Now I know that most of us will resist this charge, saying that we are very even-handed in our treatment of our pupils, but if you really want the truth, just listen to a group of your students chatting in the back seat as you drive them to the athletics carnival. The kids are sure that every teacher plays favourites and that they personally (i.e., the students in the back) are never included in that number. If you listen carefully and then start to analyse the real situation, you might well discover that the alleged 'favourite' relationship has a different explanation altogether. It might be that a teacher has sensitively recognised that a particular pupil is going through a hard time at home, or is at a difficult stage of a grieving process about a much-loved and recently departed pet, or is being bullied by someone who cannot be disciplined for the offence; to these and similar cases, a teacher might well reach out and it is even possible (though by no means certain) that the child appreciates this support. The rest of the class, however, unaware or uninterested in the causes, simply sees that someone else is being favoured and they resent it. This is how we get the reputation for playing favourites.

Like Caesar's wife, we must not only be good but we must be seen to be good

Since the object of our attention might also be being further isolated because of this perceived favouritism, we must be very careful indeed about how we offer support to those in need. At a period in our history when teachers are being very closely watched to ensure that we are not *grooming* children, we have a further significant reason to be careful. Sadly, good intentions are never enough protection. Like Caesar's wife, we must not only be good but we must be seen to be good.

The next common fault attributed to teachers is that while they train their students to play an active role in society, they often *fail to volunteer* themselves. Personally I have some trouble with this one, because I know lots of teachers who do volunteer – they are the ones whose efforts often maintain the local sports club, debating society, church choir, cake stall and charity fund-raiser. Having said that, however, there are two points worth making.

The first one is that I have noticed a marked variation between country towns and cities. I have often been very impressed by the number of teachers involved in rural areas in the various groups that keep a town going, but in larger towns and cities, this is less obvious. While I have never actually tried counting heads on

this topic, I have come to accept that this is a fair claim, just looking at the activities I have listed, with the probable exception of sport, where teacher input seems to be mandatory everywhere in Australia.

The second point – and the one that seems to have elevated this charge to its current position – is the notion shared by so many non-teachers that we have more free hours (both each day and during our endless holidays) than other people, and therefore we should be putting something back into the community. I don't think we will ever win on this one because too many people know the hours they themselves were at school and they assume that we knock off when our students do.

In this particular instance, I need to offer another caution about making judgements. As a principal, I often heard parents complain that 'other parents' in the school rarely did their share of work to support the children. I used to feel uncomfortable about the complaint, so one day I decided to do an accurate count of just who did what. I asked all staff to make a note of any tasks they knew were performed by parents – cleaning, covering books, reading to children, listening to readers, and so on – and I was both amazed and delighted at the response. There were parents doing things that I didn't know about, tasks being done that I had no inkling of, and the overall picture was one of significant and generous involvement by parents and carers. (Today, with greatly increased regulations about involving parents, such a picture might be less of a surprise.)

The lesson for me was that no matter how well you might think you know the school, it is quite possible that there are a lot of quiet individuals – and this certainly includes staff – who are picking up tasks that principals don't even know about. Any vague ideas about who does and who doesn't volunteer should be seen in this light. To suggest teachers don't volunteer might be to commit this same offence: judging others on a point where our own knowledge is skimpy.

There were parents doing things that I didn't know about, tasks being done that I had no inkling of ...

The final issue that I want to mention is that *teachers always talk shop*. This is a frequent complaint made by non-teachers, who say that whenever two or three teachers get together at a party, the air is soon full of talk about reading methods, ill-disciplined children, boring professional development courses and plans for the Christmas holidays. As an experienced teacher, I ask you: isn't this better than tales about parliamentary corruption, endless re-runs of last year's State of Origin, and yet another anecdote about some pop star's drug habits?

A more mature response to the complaint might be an admission that we probably are guilty as charged. However, having dined with doctors, lawyers, military officers, clergy, farmers, labourers or politicians, I have to say that the situation is just the same with most of them. We tend to talk about the things that most interest us and if teachers find that school still interests them at the end of the day, what is so bad about this?

In our defence, one point that I would make is that there are probably more teachers per head of population than most other professional groups, and so a simple sampling error might be involved – just as there would be an error if we went into a staff room in a hospital and remarked that there seemed to be an inordinately high ratio of nurses sipping tea or coffee!

Having said all this, I think teachers really should avoid talking shop when they are socialising. This is not out of deference to the rest of the group (although they have a case for such a suggestion) but because teachers also need a break from their labours. This means that if you are at a party and a disgruntled parent approaches you to discuss the relative merits of whole word vs phonics as a means of learning to read, just smile at them and say gently "I'd love to talk about it now, but you know how boring a party becomes if teachers just talk shop" and change the subject.

I'm sure there are teachers reading these comments (at least I hope there are teachers reading them) who might challenge some, or even all of my claims. That's fine. I think that we need to ask ourselves from time to time whether our faults annoy others. (I am thinking of the man who left his wife because she never put the toilet seat back up). However let's look quickly, judge gently, and then get on with our life. I was considering repeating this same exercise with school principals – listing our common faults and perhaps offerings some honest comments – but I couldn't do the topic the justice it deserves because my publisher likes me to limit my contributions to 2000 words per article.

ET

Dennis Sleigh, a retired principal, now acts as a leadership consultant. He has been awarded Fellowships by both ACE and ACEL and is a successful writer, with four books (two co-authored) and over 250 articles to his credit. Contact him at dwsleigh@tpg.com.au.