

TEACHER HANDBOOK

B4 | BEHAVIOUR: DIRECTING ATTENTION

WATCH



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READ | EVIDENCE SUMMARY

TEACHING CHALLENGE

Ms Silva knows what she wants her pupils to do and communicates it clearly. However, during her expositions or when pupils are working independently, she finds that some pupils simply drift off and stop paying attention to her or the task. What could she do to keep her pupils focused for more of the lesson?

KEY IDEA

Attention naturally drifts and so teachers need to continuously monitor and actively direct pupil attention to maintain a classroom where all pupils succeed.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Ms Silva can direct pupil attention and increase learning by understanding that:

- > Self-regulation and pupil motivation can affect how pupils direct their attention, which naturally wanders over time.
- > Proactively monitoring, modelling and reinforcing helps direct pupil attention and keep them on task.
- > When reinforcement is positively framed it makes pupils feel safe and creates a more productive learning environment.
- > Teachers can redirect attention in the least intrusive ways. But if action taken by the teacher is sometimes clearly visible, pupils can feel that their teacher is more effective and experience a stronger sense of shared classroom values.

ATTENTION WANDERS

Ms Silva has high expectations of her pupils. She regularly communicates these and keeps her instructions clear and concise to help pupils meet these expectations (Gathercole et al., 2016). However, even this does not guarantee that her pupils will continue to pay attention throughout the lesson.

It is natural for the mind to wander after a time, particularly in busy environments such as the classroom (Sweller et al., 1998). Attention is also influenced by pupil motivation. For example, where pupils believe they may be unsuccessful, they can end up avoiding a task, while prior experiences of success make them more likely to persist at similar tasks (Gutman & Schoon, 2013).

Whatever the reason, Ms Silva needs to recognise that pupil attention wanders, so this is something she needs to take responsibility for and direct as needed to keep her pupils learning.

DIRECTING PUPIL ATTENTION

A variety of strategies can be used to direct pupil attention. These include:

- > **Modelling:** Showing pupils exactly what paying attention looks like.
- > **Reinforcing:** Acknowledging or praising pupils who are demonstrating good levels of focus, being specific about what they are doing to earn this recognition.
- > **Positively framing:** Saying what you want to see from pupils rather than what you don't want to see.

One useful distinction here is to appreciate the difference between praise and acknowledgement. Praise entails rewarding a behaviour that exceeds expectations, whereas acknowledgement entails showing that you have noticed a behaviour that meets expectations. Over-praising pupils who are merely following standard rules can inadvertently convey low expectations and hamper learning (Coe et al., 2014).

Pupil capacity to self-regulate their emotions and behaviour influences how well they can direct their attention towards specific tasks. No-one is able to completely self-regulate their attention at all times, and this ability varies between individuals. But self-regulation can be developed, improving pupils' abilities to learn effectively (EEF, 2017). In addition, our behaviour is influenced by that of our peers. The more pupils that are paying attention, the more others will be encouraged to do so (IES, 2008). Effective teachers take account of these factors to help their pupils focus by using, for example:

- > **Brief reminders:** Issuing a quick reminder of what is expected, using consistent language and non-verbal signals. "We're just waiting for one more person to face the front in silence, thank you."

- > **Private reminders:** Having subtle conversations with individuals when it is only a few who need support to stay focused. "Hi Jenny, let me know if there is anything you need to help you get started."

- > **Benefit of the doubt:** Communicating a belief that off-task behaviour is a result of enthusiasm for learning rather than purposeful disruption. "I know you are really keen to discuss this task with your partner but, to do a good job of it, first you need to put your pens down and face me."

PUPIL PERCEPTIONS MATTER

Pupils tend to have a more positive classroom experience when they feel that their teacher is effective at managing the attention and behaviour of the class. This is important because pupils who have positive classroom experiences are more likely to feel wider life satisfaction and get better results. Pupils see effective teachers as those who (Rathmann et al., 2018):

- > Are aware of everything in class, instantly noticing when pupils aren't paying attention.
- > Manage to quickly re-involve pupils if they don't pay attention for a moment.
- > Have the class under control.

CHANGE TAKES TIME

Explaining a classroom routine just once or delivering a set of instructions without follow up is rarely enough to create lasting classroom change. For high expectations to become embedded, teachers need to continually remind and reinforce (IES, 2008).

Reinforcement is more effective when it acknowledges positive behaviour more often than highlighting negative behaviour. Over time, this approach has been shown to increase academic engagement and focus (IES, 2008).

NUANCES AND CAVEATS

Acknowledgement, praise and reminders are powerful teaching tools for directing attention. However, there are also times when teachers simply need to issue a sanction or escalate the issue in line with the school behaviour policy. For example, when pupils are being defiant, inhibiting learning or risking the safety of others (IES, 2008).

CHECK

Answer the questions below to check your understanding of the evidence summary. Answers are available at the bottom of the 'Reflect' section.

1. What reasons might a pupil be off task, despite clear instructions and modelling?

- a.) The pupil is struggling with self-regulation.
- b.) The pupil is confident with the instructions.
- c.) The pupil is worried they will not be successful at the task.
- d.) The pupil is confident with the task.

2. What is an example of positive framing?

- a.) "I can see the blue table has all their pens out."
- b.) "I have nearly 100% of the class there."
- c.) "We should all be sat with our legs crossed."
- d.) "The blue table isn't quite there yet."

3. Which of the following corrections is positively framed?

- a.) "Why have the back row not got their pens out?"
- b.) "I am still waiting as people are not following my instructions."
- c.) "Pens down, eyes on me."
- d.) "Everybody should have their book open on page 13 with their finger points on the first work, ready for reading."

FURTHER READING

Gutman, L. & Schoon, L. (2013). The impact of non-cognitive skills on the outcomes of young people. bit.ly/ecf-eef2

REFLECT

A REMINDER OF THE KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Ms Silva can direct pupil attention and increase learning by understanding that:

- > Self-regulation and pupil motivation can affect how pupils direct their attention, which naturally wanders over time.
- > Proactively monitoring, modelling and reinforcing helps direct pupil attention and keep them on task.
- > When reinforcement is positively framed it makes pupils feel safe and creates a more productive learning environment.
- > Teachers can redirect attention in the least intrusive ways. But if action taken by the teacher is sometimes clearly visible, pupils can feel that their teacher is more effective and experience a stronger sense of shared classroom values.

1. What did you see in this module that you already do or have seen in other classrooms?

2. What do you feel is the gap between your current practice and what you have seen in this module?

3. Which of the 'key takeaways' do you need to focus on? Where and when might you try to apply them to your teaching?

REFERENCES

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- Gathercole, S., Lamont, E., & Alloway, T. (2006). Working memory in the classroom. Working memory and education, 219-240.
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QUIZ ANSWERS

1. a, c
2. a, b, c
3. c, d