

Proceedings of the Institute of Acoustics

VOICE DAMAGE SUFFERED BY TEACHERS

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Teachers are educators and communicators. They are required by their statutory conditions of employment to teach, "according to their educational needs", the pupils assigned to them. They are also required to maintain good order and discipline amongst the pupils and safeguard their health and safety both while they are on school premises and when they are engaged in authorised school activities elsewhere.

The most recent DfEE Circular (Number 10/98: July 1998), which explains the teacher's right to use reasonable force to restrain or control pupils, gives a more dramatic example of how important it is for a teacher to be able to communicate clearly. The Circular says:-

"Before intervening physically a teacher should, wherever practicable, tell the pupil who is misbehaving to stop, and what will happen if he or she does not. The teacher should continue attempting to communicate with the pupil throughout the incident, and should make it clear that physical contact or restraint will stop as soon as it ceases to be necessary. A calm and measured approach to a situation is needed and teachers should never give the impression that they have lost their temper, or are acting out of anger or frustration, or to punish the pupil."

Teachers depend on and work with their voices daily. They often work with background noise from other activities in a stressful working environment and with difficult acoustics.

The first member of this Association to contact us with serious voice problems did so in early 1993. She was a primary school teacher who, as a result of voice damage, left the profession on grounds of ill-health. The condition for a teacher taking an ill-health pension is permanent incapacity to teach on health grounds. When this member went on holiday that year she had to use a signing system to communicate with her husband. This teacher believed that a key factor in her case was the open-plan design of her school. In her statement she said:-

"I have already briefly mentioned that there was concern about the school building design. It was designed as a project by students of architecture at Liverpool University and designed as a two form entry junior school. It was opened when Phase I was completed in

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1974 and the Head was directed by the Local Education Authority to admit infant children as well as juniors. Phase II has never been built, but the school still has to accommodate the age range four to eleven years.

There are no quiet teaching areas in the school, no sound absorbing materials and no methods available for shutting out background noises, particularly noise from the children and teachers.

When children either came into or went out of the school at the start or end of the day or at play times or at dinner, there was an unavoidably high noise level and most of the children had to walk through teaching areas to reach exit doors. This would have an unsettling effect on my four and five year old children and I had to use my voice to keep their attention above all this background noise in order to make sure there was a settled, controlled atmosphere."

Since then dozens of members have contacted us each year with voice problems and concerns about their voices. The problem of intrusive and background noise at school is a problem that is commonly put to us by our members. Put quite simply, our members are having to raise their voices to compensate for high noise levels and they also tell us that they find this high noise level generally disturbing.

Particular points that have been made to us include:-

1. The modern gym hall is about twice the height of the usual teaching area. The building materials do not help absorb sound, nor is there a means of natural ventilation. These halls may have to double as dining rooms so there may be an extractor system to remove stale air, including food odours from lunch time. The noise from the fan can be considerable.
2. Curtains are being replaced in some schools by blinds, either venetian or, more usually, vertical, which may be helpful in keeping out the sun (or intruders) but these are not so useful in absorbing sound.
3. In some schools the windows open only a little. They can be opened much wider if the security clasp is disengaged, but they open outwards. This may cause a dangerous obstruction for adults and children alike if there is a footpath outside. This creates a stuffy atmosphere.
4. Heating controls are usually centralised. Tamper-proof thermostats placed throughout the building can cover a wide area where differing conditions prevail.

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Our attention has been drawn to voice problems at schools with poor acoustics. We have also assisted teachers who have suffered voice damage whilst taking children swimming in the local swimming baths. One of our male teachers found himself in this situation. The teacher's medical report said:-

"Before May of 1993 he stated that his voice was perfectly normal.

Between February and May 1993 he took swimming lessons and during the interview he put great emphasis on this as a probable cause of his symptoms. He states that the swimming pool was 25 metres long and the children had to be kept within their depths from a safety point of view.

As can well be imagined, the atmosphere was noisy and he had to shout to get instructions to his pupils.

However, one morning in May 1993 he woke up and his voice had gone completely.

He states that he went to bed with a normal voice and had no idea that he would wake up in such a voiceless condition."

The medical report concluded:-

"He does indeed have my sympathy. I can well imagine trying to teach children in the surroundings of a swimming pool and I understand the effort and voice abuse that his vocal cords would have been subjected to."

That teacher's normal day to day living has been turned upside down by his voice loss. Here are some extracts from his statement:-

"I tend now to correspond by letter instead of using the telephone which is not nearly as convenient."

"I have to use my car instead of public transport, because asking for fares, tickets etc in a very noisy environment is almost impossible."

"I used to enjoy using a video camera and spend time editing the films and putting voice-overs on them etc, but again I cannot do this now and it frustrates me that I spent so much on the equipment."

"Wearing a collar and tie is now extremely uncomfortable and it presses on my voice box and causes much pain. This obviously stops me going to places and functions where more formal dress is required."

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"General day to day happenings also cause frustration, for example, my wife calls to me, I try and reply but she does not hear me. This all adds to the strain."

"As time goes by I feel more like a hermit living an isolated life."

Another common problem in schools has been excessive heat, particularly where there has been a combination of a very hot and dry atmosphere.

There is no guarantee of any voice training for teachers. We have run voice training sessions ourselves which have been extremely popular. One of our members wrote to us about her teacher training. She said:-

"During my initial teacher training I was fortunate enough to have Speech Training as part of my course. (I trained at the time when these establishments were designated 'Training College' not 'College of Education'). Such training had a two-fold benefit. Not only did it give the aspiring teacher some insight into the science of sound, it also proved useful when teaching phonics."

To summarise, from the information that we receive from our members there appear to be three relevant factors in voice problems amongst teachers. These are:-

1. The amount of talking involved in the job.
2. Vocal abuse amongst teachers.
3. Acoustic problems, particularly background noise levels.

Proper management of health and safety is a legal requirement in schools. The relevant legislation is the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992. Health and safety risks must be identified, assessed and then steps taken to reduce and eliminate those risks. There are many potential health and safety risks in schools which in many cases are very professionally being identified and addressed. However, the risk of serious voice damage to teaching staff is only rarely considered. That is because of a general lack of knowledge of potential damage that can be caused to teachers' voices at work.