

Impression or Perception?

Seeing Your Students as They Really Are

English class that morning was in full swing. I looked with satisfaction at the eager young faces of my students, who were drinking

in everything I was telling them—that is, until my glance rested on Danny.* There he was, oblivious to his surroundings, his eyes closed, and his head slowly dropping to make contact with the book on his desk. I felt anger surging through me at Danny's apparent indolence. What irked me most was that this was a daily occurrence. *Asleep at 9:30 a.m.! What a slug-gard!* I fumed to myself, determined to get to the root of the matter. Sternly, I ordered Danny to wake up and to see me after class.

When a sheepish Danny stood before me after class, hot words of condemnation and censure threatened to spew from my lips. Instead, I touched his arm and gently said, "Sit down, Danny. You look tired. You must have a reason for falling asleep so early in the morning. Can you tell me about it?"

Danny's eyes grew misty as he told me how, since the loss of his mother, he had taken to spending most of the night in his father's bar in order to help his father and to alleviate his own loneliness. Poor Danny! My heart went out to the lonely boy. Our talk stretched on for more

*Names have been changed to protect students' privacy.

than an hour as I tried to help him set his priorities straight, since he would have to take the external university entrance examination in less than a year.

In the days that followed, I showered Danny with love and attention. A noticeable change came over him. He was awake and alert in class. His grades improved dramatically.

The next year Danny and I rejoiced when the results of the university entrance exams were published. Danny not only passed the exams, he did so with flying colors. Today Danny is a successful businessman. In the years after he graduated from our school, Danny often came back to the school to express his gratitude for my timely encouragement.

Many years later, I found myself teaching at a college in a foreign country. For the first time in my life, I was teaching English as a second language. It was an uphill struggle for both the students and me, since most of them had little knowledge of English. Moreover, they did not enjoy learning the language. As the quarter progressed, I noticed that one of the students was consistently absent from class. Each time I saw Jeanie's empty chair, I felt disturbed, suspecting that her absence could

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mean only one of two things; either she was indolent or she didn't enjoy my teaching.

When called into my office, Jeanie looked smitten. Her head hung low, her shoulders drooped, and she refused to look at me in the eye. Again, hot words of condemnation rose to my lips, but I checked them sufficiently to ask why she had been absent so often. Tears coursed down Jeanie's face as she shared with me her phobia for learning a second language. To escape the torture of her inadequacy, she hid in her room rather than going to class. After a great deal of encouragement and my promise to give her extra tutoring after class each day, Jeanie left my office a different person. There was a lift to her drooping shoulders and the light of hope in her eyes. And my reward? At the end of the quarter, Jeanie's grade was one of the best, and she was

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convinced that she could learn the language after all.

In contrast to Jeanie, Hazel was a real source of inspiration to me right from the beginning of the quarter. She was one of my most receptive and intelligent students. She always sat in the front row, eagerly taking in everything I taught the class.

However, one day I realized with a jolt that she was no longer sitting in the front row. Instead, she was slumped over her desk in the back row, her eyes distant. When I spoke to her, she seemed belligerent. *Now, what have I done to offend the girl?* I thought to myself. Determined to find out, I detained her after class one day. To my relief, she assured me that I was not the cause of the problem, but she had a personal problem that was eating at her soul. After gentle probing on my part, she told me that she was seeing a married man who insisted they should live together. She was torn between her love for him and the knowledge that the relationship was not consistent with the moral principles she had been taught in school. Slowly I helped Hazel to see the wisdom of ending the relationship. From then on she was her normal self and was able to complete the class with good grades.

As teachers, it is easy for us to form shallow impressions of students, according to the standards we have set for them, as well as our own value system. Through the tinted glasses of our preconceived ideas and the impressions, based on our students' external appearance and behavior, we judge each one as good or bad, lazy or diligent, clever or stupid. However, from experiences like the above, I have learned that surface impressions can be an unreliable measure of students' attitude, character, and intelligence. Often, below the veneer is a hurting or frightened individual, waiting for the special touch of understanding and love to help set things right and to put him or her back on the straight path. As teachers, we must ask God for wisdom and perception to better see and meet the needs of the students committed to our care. ✍

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