

The Value of Silence in Schools

Intentional silence in the school day offers opportunities for deep reflection and learning.

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Mindfulness



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“Somewhere we know that without silence words lose their meaning, that without listening speaking no longer heals, that without distance closeness cannot cure.” —**Henri Nouwen**

As an educator, I hope that students gain the confidence to express themselves and the strength to ask for help. At their age, students can sometimes struggle to find their voices and hear those of others.

How can educators help students stay focused when faced with constant distraction? How can we encourage students to be reflective and consider the words and thoughts of those who are different? Silence and contemplation play a critical and valuable role in educational settings.

While it is part of the Quaker faith of my school to encourage silent reflection, the practice can bring value to any educational setting. Silence offers a structure that encourages internal discipline, and as a result, greater capacity for free thinking. It is an essential element of a pedagogical practice that supports ideas of continual growth, possibility, and fundamental care of students.

Silence Can Offer Deeper and Broader Learning

At our school, silence is often referred to as contemplative reflection, or a time to think about the meaning of lessons in the classroom or experiences beyond the school walls. While silent time is hard to fit into a busy day, it can help students become open to deeper and greater learning.

Offering opportunities for students to sit without distraction helps them absorb content and remember it, and think about additional questions. They can process the feelings and ideas expressed by their peers and consider the importance of other perspectives.

Think about history class. While there are endless historical topics to study, if there isn't time to reflect on what's being taught, a student likely will focus only on a grade achieved and not on the deeper meaning and value of the lesson. With time to think deeply, a student may consider how events from the past have shaped their life and community today, or how people felt during a period of turmoil or challenge.

Students Can Learn at Their Own Speed

While in class, students must keep up with a particular pace by following a

teacher, classmates, and curriculum, sometimes at a faster or slower speed than their own ideal rate. Homework, sports participation, testing, and even lunch break all have deadlines and time limits. Contemplative stretches of time offer students an opportunity to catch up or wind down and process at their own tempo.

At our school, we offer queries to both our students and faculty, followed by time for reflection and sharing. Questions can be big or small, and are often inspired by a student, a current event, or community dialogue. Students benefit from deep thought and genuine listening beyond their time in school, using this practice to support future studies, work, or relationships.

Silence Can Encourage Discipline and Focus

Taking time to listen to one's own breath and the natural sounds of the classroom or environment can help students push aside chatter, become centered, and make space for thought. Reflecting instead of speaking when an idea comes to mind can encourage students to practice focus and self-control. Silence and contemplative reflection support this meditative practice of mindfulness in the school setting.

Silence can also give students the opportunity to develop careful and intentional communication—an important skill needed to support collaborative work and decision-making, and to encourage civil discourse.

Educators can end classes with time for students to think about the content and become centered for the next activity. Consider offering silent time when you notice that students are feeling particularly stressed or you notice high tension and frustration.

Younger students may be resistant to even short moments of silence, and teachers can encourage writing or drawing to accompany silent reflection until the next opportunity to try again. Building a community and culture comfortable with silent reflection takes regular practice, patience, and time.

In some educational settings, silence was used as punishment. Students who acted out were assigned to have lunch or break times in silence. The positive use of silence I'm describing in no way reflects outdated punitive models of restricting student voice.

Silence Can Bond and Unite

In any relationship—at school, in the classroom, at home, or in the community—silence is an opportunity. Reflecting together can foster deeper understanding and, ultimately, greater unity.

Silence also encourages careful and deliberate listening to the voices, opinions, and beliefs of others. Listening without anticipating and articulating an immediate response provides space for understanding ideas, perspectives, and experiences that may differ from one's own. In this way, deep listening and silent reflection can help eliminate fear, bridge perceived divisions between individuals, and serve to support conflict resolution.

The Power of Silence for the Whole Community

“Silence is one of the greatest gifts we have,” said Fred Rogers. Silence was Mr. Rogers's delight, and he believed it to be a gift that is available to all of us. Adults and teachers can enjoy the benefits of silence on a daily basis as well—by being silent themselves and allowing students to lead discussions and direct conversations. In this way, teachers can listen deeply and carefully to the joys, fears, concerns, and cares of their students. Silence then becomes an essential tool for communication between teachers and students.

[A study](#) on the use and impact of silence concluded that abstaining from talking or intervening in the classroom could aid in the professional development of teachers and “provide fruitful basis for a deeper understanding of classroom practice.”

As we navigate these cacophonous times, it's wonderful to observe the power

of great listeners who find and appreciate the meaning that exists in the silence between the words. Creating a space filled with silence rather than sound helps members of the educational community find their voices.