

Integrating Silence Practices Into the Classroom

The Value of Quiet

Cathleen Haskins

Periods of silence that foster inner peace, creativity, and renewal can be remarkably beneficial in the classroom.

Solitude and silence: Trappist Monk Thomas Merton wrote about it, renowned Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh teaches about it, Mother Teresa spoke of it, spiritual guide and author Eckhart Tolle addresses it, and Jesus spent 40 days in it. From Christianity to Buddhism, Hinduism and Quakerism, silence has held particular significance in the search for human wholeness. Ancient sages, scholars, and philosophers have historically sought out the refuge of solitude and silence. At the same time, engaging in moments of silence or practicing periods of solitude are not born of, nor do they belong to, any particular religion, but are of a broader spiritual nature. As we seek and work toward holistic education reform at all levels, we might consider the value of creating learning environments that offer exercises in stillness and silence. Not the silence commanded by a higher authority (adult), but the silence that fosters inner peace, creativity, and renewal.

Most young children today are bombarded with such a deluge of daily activity that their young lives are too busy for quiet time. They are rushed from one after school activity to another, hurriedly shuttled off to summer classes and camps when they could be reading on a blanket under a tree, gazing out a window, or sitting by a stream noticing pebbles, twigs, tadpoles, or the movement of the water. For these children, the slow, easy freedoms of childhood barely exist. They have so little time for doing nothing, so few opportunities to just *be*. Adolescents are growing up with technological innovations that interfere with their ability and desire to know quiet and solitude and to draw from the well of resources that private, silent experiences provide. Technology is easy and portable; stashed in pockets and purses,



CATHLEEN HASKINS works full time as a writer, speaker, and consultant advocating for holistic peace, and Montessori education reform. Her work is based on the premise that we transform the individual and create a more peaceful society when we change how we educate children. She can be contacted at cathleen@teachingforpeace.com

tiny devices make every moment an opportunity for communication with all things external, suppressing the sound of the inward call.

We adults know that the sounds of silence are hard to find these days, all but replaced with a sinking unsettledness, feelings of being overwhelmed, and an unconscious tendency to turn on the TV, radio, music, computer, or cell phone when we are alone. Our comfort with quiet has gone missing, noise has become commonplace, and we are disconnected from our own inner resources.

If children, starting at a young age and continuing throughout their school years, were able to experience stillness and silent activities during the school day, might they be better equipped to draw on the benefits that silence and solitude offer?

How Silence and Stillness Benefits Children

Slowing Down

When I was teaching I had a handmade poster in a frame on a shelf that read, "Don't just do something, sit there." Those words weren't my own, but I liked the concept because the message signaled a shift in my productivity-centered paradigm toward an understanding of the value of balancing doing and non-doing. The notion that non-action merits consideration is a radical departure from the commonly held belief that has taken deep root over the last half century: that activity and productivity are the true measures of success. (Don't just sit there, do something!) Such an attitude promotes busyness over restorative practices, efficiency over craftsmanship, and multitasking over mindful presence and awareness. This is the same paradigm that values output more highly than focusing inward, and intellectual progress more than inner growth. Carl Honore, author of *In Praise of Slow* (2004, 14) writes,

Fast and slow do more than just describe a rate of change. They are shorthand for ways of being, or philosophies of life. Fast is busy, controlling, aggressive, hurried, analytical, stressed, superficial, impatient, active, quantity over quality. Slow is the opposite: calm, careful, receptive, still, intuitive, unhurried, patient, reflective, quality over quantity. It's about mak-

ing real and meaningful connections — with people, cultures, work, food, everything.

I worked at a public elementary school in which some members of the faculty did not want benches, picnic tables, or other seating on the playground for the children for fear they would just sit and do nothing. Can we come to see that simply being still is beneficial in itself? How are the first flowers of spring discovered, the fluid shapes of clouds observed, or the fragrance of dried autumn leaves taken in, if we are in constant motion?

It goes without saying that as long as our educational system remains standards-based and maintains a structure in which all students study the same thing at the same time, there will be little room for practices that support pause, pondering, or for breath-based exercises. Teachers who are persistently pressured to improve test scores will find it difficult to honor slowness, stillness, and silence.

In Waldorf and Montessori schools, however, the structure and philosophy do allow for such activities.

Transitioning and Renewing

Within traditional schools of thought, much learning in early childhood education is based in play, and it is thought that learning activities for older students should be fun. In a Montessori learning environment, the child's school activity is regarded (in a very positive way) as work that is respected and esteemed. There is something deeply authentic in valuing a child's school activity as purposeful work. "Fun" may not be the word of choice to describe a Montessori child's attitude toward her work, rather she might express enjoyment or acknowledge feeling satisfied or inspired by her work at school. It was Maria Montessori's (1972, 104) firsthand observation that a child is often energized by in-depth engagement work.

Children have instincts whose existence we did not even suspect. They possess a surprising fundamental instinct — he wants to work. The child teaches us that work is not a virtue, not an effort that man is forced to make; it is not the need to earn a livelihood. Work is fundamental instinct.

Imagine an early elementary classroom in which, as Montessori envisioned it, the children are free to choose their work each day. This is possible when the classroom environment is prepared in such a way that all options are meaningful learning activities, and when from the earliest educational experiences the issues of choice and responsibility are addressed. (The secret of successful choice-based classrooms is *always* in the prepared environment.) The student not only chooses what she will study, but where in the classroom she will sit, and whether or not to work alone. This level of control and choice fosters a deeper sense of purpose and the child becomes more deeply invested in her work.

When a child has completed a project in which she has invested so much of herself, working with vigor and diligence for an hour or a full morning work period, she may feel exuberant or excited in her accomplishment. She may feel tired or like she has lost her focus. A brief period of silence, some simple breathing exercises, or a visit to the inner peace area will provide an opportunity for the child to clear the mind, shift gears, and prepare a mental space to focus on the work activity that is chosen next. In this way, a short time spent in a silence and stilling exercise becomes a successful tool for transitioning from one activity to another.

Cultivating Concentration

The ability to concentrate deeply is necessary for any significant accomplishment that is undertaken in life. Higher levels of concentration make learning easier, yet concentration is often elusive, interrupted by noise, either external or internal, most often both. Who will argue that our world has gotten progressively noisier as technology has advanced? Author Anne LeClaire spent two Mondays a month for five years in silence and suggests in her book, *Listening Beneath the Noise* (2009), that much of the noise that invades our homes and communities is a form of violence. Most people would think her assertion an exaggeration, yet for those who come to know silence intimately, who practice it on a daily basis and who find shelter and calm within the folds of quietude, LeClaire speaks a truth. There are few remaining sanctuaries of silence. Machines make our work easier and faster, but they add a lot of noise to our daily

living. Innovations for personal amusement assure that in our homes, vehicles, and backyards we shall not be without entertainment, but at the same time they distract and derail us. The diversions we seek to fill would-be moments of quiet have robbed our homes, neighborhoods, and communities of silence.

This is the world today's children know: nonstop, incessant noise. From the time they wake until the time they go to bed children are immersed in external noise from things we take for granted, rarely thinking twice about washers, dryers, dishwashers, garbage disposals, coffee grinders, blenders, electric toothbrushes, TVs, radio, music, and computers. Step outdoors and add lawnmowers, leaf blowers, snowblowers, and rototillers, not to mention traffic noise, car alarms, aircraft, and trains. We entertain ourselves with all-terrain vehicles, motorcycles, and motorboats. At the very least we should be aware that we all live in a storm of noise that deprives children of knowing the beauty of silence. They walk around with ear jacks and cell phones pushed against their ears and they travel from place to place in vehicles whose headrests have been replaced with monitors for movie viewing. How can they know silence? How can they grow comfortable in quiet? How can they cultivate concentration?

However, in Montessori classrooms and others like them, children become familiar with the beauty of silence. Preschoolers learn that they have the power to create silence, having experienced *Quietly Be!* instead of *Be Quiet!* When students create a climate of quiet during work time, they are cultivating an environment that fosters concentration and attention. Unlike many classrooms in which quiet is compulsory, children take great pride in being able to create a quiet environment. As a new Montessori teacher, I was initially puzzled how I could create a learning environment that allowed for a low level of noise — an inherent part of freedom, movement, partner work, and discourse — while at the same time securing a quiet place that allowed deepened concentration and focus. The students and I found that by designating a section of the classroom as a sacred, silent place for working individually in silence and another area for working with partners, both elements could co-exist in the classroom. (This was a classroom that consists of tables and areas with car-

pet for floor work rather than a desk for each child and each child in his desk.) Through discussions and experience the children came to value working independently and began to understand that sometimes working with a friend or in small groups is the better choice, but at other times it is preferable to work independently. Given opportunities, students will come to understand the positive power of silence in developing strong habits of concentration and focus.

External noise is not the only barrier to developing concentration and attention; if the mind is ceaselessly chattering, silence is impossible. Imagine trying to read a science journal or a how-to book with an overactive mind. You are distracted internally by racing thoughts and you find that although you have "read" a page, you really don't remember what you've just read. You either lose some of the information, or you must reread the passage because your active mind interfered with your ability to concentrate.

Can we talk with our students about this? Are we able to help them find ways to still the overactive mind so that they are able to experience the inner peace of concentration and sustained attention? Inner silence is the more difficult silence to cultivate; yet it is the more important. It is often difficult to subdue external noise, but the silence of the mind is within our control. If our environment is quiet but our mind is chaotic, it is nearly impossible to achieve deep and lasting concentration. However, even when the external environment is noisy, if the mind is free of incessant chatter one can focus deeply on the activity at hand. Students want to develop these inner powers; they simply need to be given the proper tools and exercises to learn how to control internal noise. In this way students of all ages can improve their own concentration and attention which can make learning easier.

Mindful Awareness and Presence

The practice of mindfulness has been getting a great deal of attention recently, and has found its way into classrooms across the country. My own interest in mindfulness in the classroom has been ongoing over the past decade, and though concentration and mindfulness often work together, for classroom purposes I differentiate between them. Concentration is a single-point focus attentiveness, to the

exclusion of all other thoughts or surrounding activity, whereas mindfulness, as described by Jon Kabat Zinn (1994, 4) is

paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality.

In silent mindfulness exercises students focus on their own breathing, learn to pay attention to the sensation in their bodies, and be more aware of their surroundings. Mindfulness is an experience in slowing down, increased clarity, and heightened sensory awareness.

For example, you may ask students to look about the room for objects that are a specific color, say, blue. After they have had a few minutes to scan the room, ask them to look for objects that are *dark* blue, next ask them to find *light* blue items. Continue on by changing the criteria: blue-gray, blue-green, blue-violet, turquoise, or robin's egg blue. Perhaps you can ask students to be mindful of the color blue throughout the day, noting all of the different shades of blue.

Mindfulness fine-tunes the senses in ways that bring clarity and keener awareness of the world around and within. While the decades-old practice of multitasking as a method for "getting more done" has diminished our ability to see clearly and has muddied the waters of tranquility, the slow, quiet practices of mindfulness allow full attention and wakefulness to what is going on in the present moment.

Creativity

Early on I discovered that there is a direct correlation between quiet and creativity. In the space of silence, ideas can surface and connections can be made. All distractions distort and ultimately destroy creativity, noise most of all. And, of course, on the most basic level, silence is enormously restful to both body and mind and that frees up energy to create. (Anne LeClaire 2009)

Albert Einstein (2006) once said, "I lived in solitude in the country and noticed how the monotony of a quiet life stimulates the creative mind." We all, regardless of our age, need quiet time to mull around ideas, contemplate and reflect, just as Einstein came

to appreciate monotony. If creativity rises up when the mind is still enough for ideas and visions to surface, then we need time to empty into silence. When the surroundings are quiet and the mind slows down, there is space available to lay out and organize thoughts and for new ideas to surface and be known.

"Solitude," writes Bucholtz (1998)

is required for the unconscious to process and unravel problems. Others inspire us, information feeds us, practice improves our performance, but we need quiet time to figure things out, to emerge with new discoveries, to unearth original answers.

Are we able and willing to consider the practical value of silence for a child who simply needs time to think? Or is the potential for "wasted time" likely to stop the teacher from exploring with her students the meaning, value, self-discipline and trust that is a necessary prerequisite for the freedom to create and refine ideas. Virginia Woolf (1927) wrote of the creativity-silence connection in her book, *To The Lighthouse*.

And that was what now she often felt the need of — to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself.... When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless.

Becoming Calm

I was about ready to begin my second year as an elementary Montessori teacher, preparing my classroom on an August day when my principal stopped in to inform me that a new student had been enrolled in my classroom. This young boy, I'll call him "James," was entering as a third grader, and had tried to kill himself only three months earlier. Although I was new as a Montessori teacher, I had years of experience working with children of all ages in many different environments. Despite that, I was not sure how I could meet the needs of this little boy, wounded as he must have been.

I had just read Aline Wolf's (1996) book, *Nurturing the Spirit of the Child*, and it inspired me to create a peace area with a Japanese rock garden at the table.

Since we were a small country school and my classroom was at the end of a short hallway, I made a quiet area directly outside the classroom door, where a large window provided a view of the pastoral country setting beyond. On the wall I hung a peaceful poster of a young child on the grass holding a small bunny, and on a small wooden TV table I placed my homemade rock garden. I brought out a wicker chest donated by a parent, upon which I placed a large, thriving philodendron plant.

It was a simple setting, but James, a tense, hesitant, distrusting child, was clearly drawn to it; he used it often, along with the other children. I saw how raking the paths around the pebbles in the rock garden calmed him. Sometimes he just sat and looked out the window. At the end of the year he gave me a hand drawn picture of himself in the classroom and across the top he had written, *I love this class. I wish I could be in it next year*. From then on, I always found a way to incorporate a quiet/peace area in my classroom.

Experiences in silence and stillness provide pathways to easing stress and calming the mind and body. Students often come to school bearing the weight of stress from the home environment and during the day friendship issues, schoolwork frustrations, and other worries add emotional distress. An inner peace area in which students can spend a bit of time relaxing by themselves is needed to nurture the spirit of the child.

Creating Dedicated Inner Peace Place

It's not unusual to find a peace area in a Montessori classroom. A large space is not needed to create a place of inner peace. A chair by a low window functions as well as a quiet corner in the room and a low room divider or shelf partitions can define a peace area. Furnish your inner peace place simply; a comfortable chair and a small table will suffice. If you are fortunate to be in a classroom with more space available, you can set it up to be used by two students at the same time. Again, if space allows, include a shelf for peace objects or activities. A plant, fresh flowers, or other natural items add to the ambiance of your class peace area.

Students should have free access to the inner peace place, but it's helpful to give students a general

idea of what is a reasonable amount of time. A small clock works for older children, but young children might fare better with a sand timer.

Peaceful Quiet Activities

There are, of course different ways to set up an inner peace place. The simplest arrangement is a table where a peaceful activity is available. Two exceptional activities are the tabletop Zen rock garden and a Japanese brush painting activity.

With the Zen rock garden, even young children can arrange pebbles and create paths in the sand around the pebbles with miniature rakes. The brush painting activity involves making strokes on a special board with a brush dipped in water. After the child has created a design on the board, he puts the brush down to sit still and quietly watch the design slowly disappear.

The soothing rhythmic motion of a sand pendulum will also calm students as they silently observe its movement trace intricate patterns in the sand. A battery-operated candle that changes colors, a sandtimer, a water fountain, fishbowl, ant farm, pair of binoculars (if near a window), or a mandala peace ring are all objects that encourage children and older students to point their focus on an object to still their bodies and quiet their minds.

It is worth considering setting aside a short time for silence each day, during which students might close their eyes, daydream, sketch, write poetry, engage in yoga, or simply do nothing. I incorporated this idea into my classroom the last year I was teaching. A teacher at a peace retreat shared it with me and when I told my students about it they were enthusiastic about trying it. We did, and they loved it!

Conclusion

Most children know silence only as an action demanded from them, or as punishment from controlling adults and teachers. They have been denied, by adults who have lost their own way in this noisy world, the resources of quietude and contemplation. Yet, if we offer children opportunities to experience the sacred splendor of silence, they will receive what no textbook can offer — access to his inner self, a place of wisdom, authentic power, and creativity.

References

- Buchholz, E. The call of solitude. 1998. Available online at www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199802/the-call-solitude
- Einstein, A. 2006. *The Einstein reader*. New York: Citadel.
- Honore, C. 2004. *In praise of slowness; How a worldwide movement is challenging the cult of speed*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. 1994. *Wherever you go, there you are*. New York: Hyperion.
- LeClaire, A. 2009. *Listening beneath the noise*. New York: Harper.
- Montessori, M. 1972. *Education and peace*. Chicago: Regnery.
- Wolf, A. *Nurturing the spirit of the child*. Hollidaysburg, PA: Parent Child Press.
- Woolf, V. 1927. *To the lighthouse*. Richmond, Surrey: Hogarth Press.