

The Power of Silence in the Classroom

By Nancy Siegel

Imagine a classroom in which you could hear a pin drop. Impossible? No, I have witnessed it. Silence is accessible at any time. Sometimes, we just need to stop and listen to it.

What is Silence?

Silence is more than the absence of sound. It is a stillness that resides deep in the heart, and touches the cognitive, psychological, physiological and spiritual dimensions of our lives. Its proven benefits are unknown to many of us who believe that if we aren't talking, we are not being productive.

What Does it Really Mean to be Silent?

To enter into silence, one must relax, no matter how many distractions are around. When we first try to achieve stillness, our thoughts may continue to race. "Monkey chatter" takes over the brain. As a six-year-old said, "It's hard for me. First, I get one thought, then another and another, and I just don't know which one to listen to."

Silence can be deafening. If we allow ourselves to leave the outer world and enter our inner one by sitting quietly, the brain chatter eventually slows down, thoughts settle, and our minds begin to clear.

After a storm, mud in a pond settles and the water becomes clear. The same phenomenon occurs with our thoughts. If we wait long enough the chatter might even go away altogether. Longer periods of focused silence can lead to renewal, or even transformation.

Does Silence have Benefits?

If we took time out regularly to slow down and listen to the silence, our lives would far less frenetic. Quiet reflection has the potential to be very self-nurturing, because the potential for harmony of the heart and mind resides in this stillness and solitude.

Yoga and Silence

The ancient art and science of yoga offers us a system of using the breath as a vehicle to find stillness and silence in the inner world. Breath is the bridge between body and mind, the gateway to the soul. It is through the breath that we enter our inner world, and in turn have the opportunity to quiet our thoughts so we can listen to our heart.

What Benefit Does Silence in the Classroom Have?

When we guide children to find their inner voices or true essence, we give them access to a powerful resource for calm, order and self-regulation. Once a teacher understands the power of silence, she can use it to create a safe and welcome break from the loud and hectic school day. A teacher's silent presence alone can bring support and confidence to her students.

Use the following exercises to move a classroom of noisy students to silence by letting them get in touch with their inner worlds.

Exercise 1: Silence at the Desk

Have students find comfortable positions at their desks, with backs straight and feet firmly planted on the ground. Gently rest hands on knees or on top of the desk, palms down. Invite the eyes to close and attention to drop inside.

Just listen. Listen to the sounds in the room and outside the room. Go inward and listen to the heartbeats.

Keeping eyes closed, bring the right palm up to the heart, then place the left palm on top of the right. Feel the heart beating. Is it saying something? Listen to the silence.

After completing this group exercise, one ten-year-old girl commented, "We relax from our hearts."

Exercise 2: Magic Rainbow Ride

Lie on the floor on a soft towel, blanket or yoga mat. Comfortably release into a journey, allowing a magic carpet of clouds to float you higher and higher into the sky. Look around. What do you see and hear? What do you smell?

Allow the carpet to take you to a special familiar or brand new place. Are you alone or do you have company? If your mind wanders, just take a deep breath to bring yourself back.

Look up at a beautiful rainbow. Take in each color as you breathe deeply through your nose. Pay attention to how each color makes you feel.

Slowly start your journey home, bringing with you the memories of the special place. As you land, bring physical awareness back into your body. Wiggle your fingers and toes. Slowly bring your knees up to your chest and give yourself a hug. Roll onto your right side, hug your knees and take a deep breath. Gently push yourself up into a comfortable seated position and sit for a few more moments with your eyes closed. Allow yourself to feel whatever sensations or feelings come up.

Integrating the Silence

Write or draw a picture about the thoughts and feelings you experienced. What changed? Pay careful attention to what came up for you. Ultimately, activities like these can lead to a much deeper experience in guided imagery.

Want to learn more? Read Richard Mahler's *Stillness: Daily Gifts of Solitude*. Enjoy the silence!

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