

Quality Education News

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Issue 60

November 2021



A quarterly publication issued by the South African Quality Institute (SAQI) in the interest of promoting educational excellence.

Dear Supporter of Quality Education

Silence, please!



Schools are noisy places. It's understandable. Children are naturally boisterous and in many schools, they're crowded into too-small spaces. On top of the children's noises, add that of staff members. Most schools are situated in built-up areas. Throw the outside traffic and noise beyond the school gates into the mix. It then becomes understandable when the teacher pleads, "Silence, please!"

Quality schools work hard at keeping noise levels down. Obviously, there's no need to insist on graveyard silence. Yet there's still a need for a sense of quiet industry across the school.

As a school aims to reduce noise levels, it needs to guard against imposing negative or weak silence. That sort of silence is where children are suppressed. The silence shuts down the voices of the students. Clair (1998:250) makes the observation:

Teachers who scream for silence, who threaten and punish children into silent submission, will never know a lasting silence or silence that is filled with thoughtfulness. Lurking within the forced silence is a scream of resistance.

This type of silence is of the, "Shut up and listen to me!" type. The teacher crushes respectful dialogue and meaningful interaction between the child and the teacher.

When there is silence in the classroom, the teacher's voice can too often become the all-pervasive, dominant one. It is common courtesy that there be attentive silence when the teacher is speaking. Yet this does not mean that it's the only voice that is heard during a lesson. If the teacher's voice is the only one heard, that person takes on the role of

being the fount of all knowledge. Learners are reduced to being empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge.

They become uncritical receivers of the teacher's personal interpretation of knowledge. The teacher is the only person who decides on lesson content and how it is to be taught. Students are reduced to being passive listeners. This negative silence slams shut the door of the critical, introspective thinking mind. Learners are discouraged from questioning what has been taught and to express different opinions.

When there's negative silence, sensitive but important topics might not be raised. Topics ignored could be unpleasant realities found in a school. They include bullying, human rights, gender-based biases and prejudices as well as racism. When such issues are avoided, they fester in undercurrents within the school.

Negative silence can be imposed by the learners amongst themselves. A familiar classroom example is where boys ridicule girls who wish to make verbal input in lessons. The girls are teased into a state of submissive silence.

In contrast to negative silence, there's positive silence. This is the silence that's found in a small but ever-increasing number of schools across the world. Such schools see many benefits in having a culture of quietness and silence. When there's this type of silence, there's calmness and interactions are likely to be more respectful. Research has shown that teachers teach and learners learn better in such environments.

Over the last few decades, there have been worldwide efforts to reduce the physical pollution of our environment. We've seen the devastating consequences of not caring. Catastrophic climate conditions have given us never-seen-before intensity levels of avalanches, droughts, fires and floods.

There's a need to look at another form of pollution – noise. In our schools, we see the negative results of ever-increasing decibels of sound. Teachers find it harder to teach in the midst of all the surrounding noise. Learners becoming distracted and difficult to manage as they struggle to listen, participate and reflect during lessons.

We need to reduce meaningless school noise. Positive silence is beautiful for the mind. We become more peaceful; we become less stressed. Silence should be part of our daily lives. Fortunately, like true quality, silence doesn't cost a single cent. We can make positive silence happen right this instant.

Sincerely

Richard Hayward

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Advantages of positive silence

Children in today's classrooms have virtually no time to simply dream, wait, think, ponder or learn to be still.

David Geoffrey Smith

Few schools actively encourage positive silence. In Britain there are a small number such as Tonbridge School in Kent and the St James cluster of schools (Boys, Girls and Junior) in London. Quaker schools regard an appreciation of silence as a significant aspect of education. What do these schools see as the advantages of positive silence?

1 Positive silence reduces pre-determined ways of thinking

In the traditional classroom, the teacher is often 'centre stage' in the learning process. Children are passive recipients of pre-structured rational ways of thinking (Lees: 105). When there's positive silence, the children are given the power to think for themselves. Broad, deep and reflective thinking are encouraged. Creativity and initiative permeate classroom discussions.

2 Positive silence creates a happier school environment

Classrooms are microcosms of different cultures, races and religions found in the wider society. When the children walk into classrooms, they reflect those differences by what they say and do. If those different ways of expressing themselves are not managed well by the teacher, conflict starts to rise within groups. A minority of children, for example, could be bullied because of their home backgrounds. 'In-groups' and 'out-groups' are formed. If you've been thrown out of the groups, you're marginalised. The message is blunt: You don't belong here.

When there's positive silence, there's reflective thinking about one's peers. There's an ethic of acceptance and respect for the differences found in others. In such an atmosphere, children and the staff see each other in non-judgmental ways. Respectful consideration of others has a cascade effect. Bullying is reduced, harmonious interactions are more likely and a nurturing, happy school environment is created.

3 Positive silence allows for a focus on good academic results

Those schools that promote positive silence believe that it often results in good academic results. However, the schools emphasise that silence is not the main reason for the children's achievements. When there's silence, the distractions of noise are reduced. It then becomes easier to focus and absorb what is being taught. Uninterrupted silence gives time for thinking that is creative, lateral and problem-solving.

We learn at different speeds. When there's silence, that silence allows for the learning to take place at a pace best suited to the individual. The slow, methodical student is able to absorb the work at an ideally individualised pace that avoids being overwhelmed. In contrast, the quick-paced learner is able to work at a preferred faster pace. Nobody needs to be neither bored nor overwhelmed by the school work.

4 Positive silence undoes the externalisation of the self

Most people claim that they would like to be their own person. Individuality is prized. Such people would claim – in the words of the Frank Sinatra song – that they do things, 'My way'. The truth is that most folk suppress who they truly are as unique individuals. They crave to have a sense of belonging to the group. In so doing, they allow their individuality to be crushed. They've externalised themselves to conform to what others are like and what those others think and do.

Children learn to belong by going on to the internet, play stations, WhatsApp and the like. They find out what's OK and what's not OK. Books, magazines, radio and TV programmes add to the description of what is needed to truly be part of the 'in-crowd'.

Positive silence helps the child undo the externalisation of the self. The child doesn't have to be anybody else. The child isn't reduced to being a carbon copy reflection of society. A child who – after rational thinking – is comfortable with their own uniqueness and not craving to become someone else, is likely to be happier for that.

5 Positive silence respects a child's need for silence

In every classroom there are children (and teachers!) who like talking a great deal. Often they're labelled as extroverts. There are times when such behaviour is fine and even encouraged. However, there are also those times when extroverts are inclined to talk first before thinking about what should be said or rather left unsaid. They seem to work best in an environment of busyness all around them.

In contrast, there are those children for whom silence is golden. Meaningful work and insightful thinking are sometimes better done in an atmosphere of quiet. For these children, the lower the background noise, the better they work. Such children are often described as introverts.

Introverts don't tumble into expressing their thoughts. Much thinking precedes a small amount of measured talking. Often they're reluctant to having to speak to large groups. There are those children who will remember when they become adults, the terror of being forced to give speeches and presentations to their peers. Sadly, there are teachers who have classroom discussions where every child is almost forced to make verbal input.

It's also to be remembered that there are those children who have learning difficulties and speech impediments. How crucial it is for the teacher to respect their pleading eyes for them to be allowed to remain silent.

6 Positive silence brings a democratic experience into schools

Traditionally, schools are hierarchies. There's the head of the school at the top. Lower levels of power are below. Fortunately, there's a growing 21st change from such rigid thinking. Yes, schools are still hierarchies of power but that power is more muted. Those at the helm display qualities such as democratic and servant leadership.

Positive silence encourages insightful reflection on what is happening in a school. Should there be abuses of power, they're noted. Should there be 'elephants in the room' topics, they're not allowed to hide in the undergrowth. They're brought out into the open. People fearlessly and openly raise issues at meetings. Such issues are often preceded by much prior thinking. Discussions are imbued with respect towards everyone's different viewpoints.

Positive silence leads on to action. The action taken is the outcome of rational thinking and inner reflection. Decisions are not rushed. Agreed-on action has ethical behaviour at the core. That behaviour respects the democratic rights of every individual.

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Phillips, K 2017. How to use silence as a teaching tool. <https://theartofeducation.edu/2017/11/06/silence-teaching-tool/>

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Can you hear the silence?



Yes, silence can be heard and felt. Where children are working quietly on their own in a classroom, the silence is almost tangible. The only sounds heard might be slight coughs or pages of books being gently turned. No teachers' voices break the quietness. That silence suggests that the pupils are absorbed in what they are doing. Meaningful learning is happening.

How are teachers and schools able to create places of such quiet industry?

Silence can be created in techniqued or technique-less ways (Lees: 76-83). Techniqued silence is achieved through formal training. The most familiar trainings are in meditation and mindfulness. Here the person is taught how to focus on the present moment; how to avoid thinking of past events or thinking into the future. Be aware of one's present surroundings. Be alive to one's five senses. Calm oneself through gentle breathing techniques. Become silent.

If you Google 'meditation' and 'mindfulness' you'll find plenty pertinent material. Most bookshops will have titles on these two topics. One such book that deals with these topics in a non-academic and practical way, is a 2015 DK book published by Penguin Random House. It's titled *Practical Mindfulness* and the consultant is Ken A Verni. I recommend the book as a worthwhile addition to both your school and staffroom libraries.

Technique-less ways to classroom silence include:

- Standing still
- Moving from a noisy to a quieter place
- Children sit quietly for a minute or two before the start of a lesson
- Have silence for a number of seconds before calling on someone to give an answer
- Silent weekly reading periods scheduled into language and/or the whole school timetable
- Written work activities where children don't ask questions nor teacher speaks.



Where are your silent places?

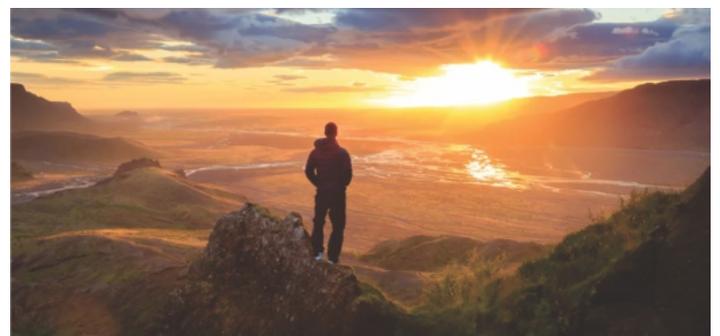
When the break time bell rings, it's not only the children who rush to escape the classroom. It's often the teachers too. They look forward to the staffroom where they are able to relax and gather their thoughts. However, this retreat can be just as noisy. There's a practical problem if the teacher would like to be in a quiet place. Seldom is there a silent spot in the usually noisy staffroom.

If the school is under the aegis of a particular religious denomination, it's likely to have a chapel or prayer room. It might have a meditation room. Yet a secular school can also create a place of quietness. A library should be a place of silence. Chatterers are discouraged from chatting in the library. Chat somewhere else. Every school that is fortunate enough to have gardens, can landscape an alcove or quiet retreat area.

A silent place can become a golden retreat before returning to the hurly-burly of classrooms and school life.

Reference

Lees, H E 2012. *Silence in schools*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.



Catching children young and exposing them to the soothing qualities of being silent could help them deal with any psychological distress – all children experience difficulties – and help them as they enter their adult lives.

Helen Lees

What is Total Quality Education (TQE)?

What is Total Quality Education (TQE)? Why is the concept so important to anyone interested or involved in education? TQE is able to turn an ordinary school into an outstanding one. How does it do that?

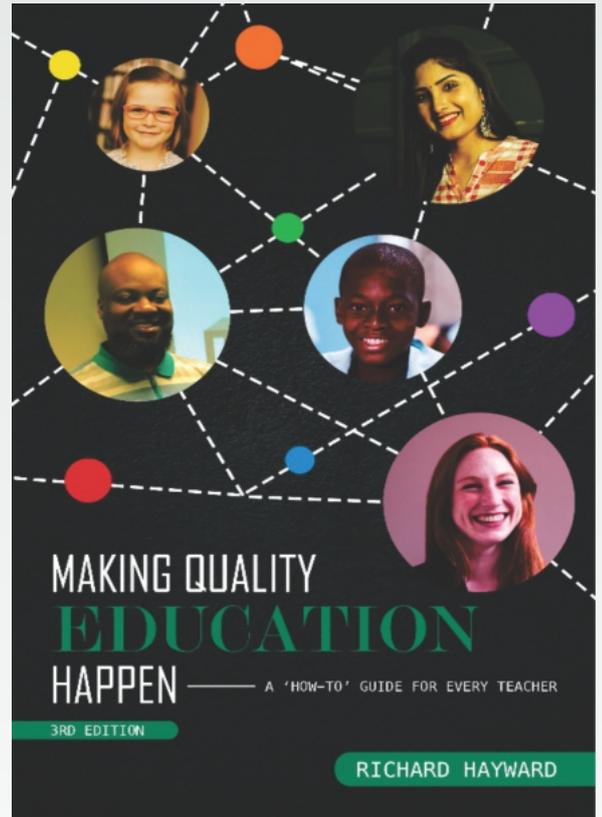
TQE looks at quality leadership and management practices and principles from across the world. It then adapts them to the unique field of education. You don't need money (although a small amount helps!) to create quality classrooms and schools.

Every Quality school – whether rural or urban or poor or rich - is similar. Such a school focuses on five crucial leadership and management pillars. The school is able to adapt, survive and thrive even in chaotic, pandemic times. Educational excellence doesn't need to miss a heartbeat.

Included in this third edition, is discussion on how to deal with a range of fraught school issues. They include bullying, gender-based and racial prejudices. Attention is also given to what can be done to deal with potential abuse of power by authority figures.

Every dedicated teacher knows that education is challenging. It makes tough demands. Yet there's immense enjoyment, much laughter and sense of professional achievement too. There are easy-to-apply ways to create and nurture such a school.

As you read this book, be inspired by this 21st century approach to education. Enjoy the true incidents. Be challenged to use TQE quality practices and principles. They definitely work ... guaranteed! They add true quality to the school day for every child and every teacher.



**Making Quality Education happen:
a 'how-to' guide for every teacher**

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SACE

South African Council for Educators

Towards Excellence in Education

Quality teachers are also learners

Every school is unique. Yet every quality school is similar. One similarity is that the school believes that it's not only the learners that should be learning. The teachers should be learning too. Continuous professional development happens all the time.

SACE (South African Council for Educators) endorses a huge range of professional development activities that earn CPTD points. Fourteen activities done by SAQI have received such endorsements.

For details of these SAQI courses and workshops, please contact Dr Richard Hayward. He can be contacted on 011 888 3262 or rpdhayward@yahoo.com

Poor schools are sponsored.