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In a silent way: student perceptions of silence in community

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Abstract

This paper explores young people's perceptions of the role and value of shared 'gathered' silence in the corporate life of a school community. It draws on a small-scale qualitative investigation in a Quaker school setting . There may be particular things to learn about the practice of stillness and silence inherent in the ethos of a Quaker school. The silence referred to in this discussion of its value in schools is a rich, positive 'strong' type of silence. This study suggests that shared silent spaces can be both personal and interpersonal. In terms of the former, they may offer valuable opportunities for young people to be still and open to their inner life. Regarding the latter, interpersonal shared community silence may enhance a sense of closeness and connection to one another and perhaps offer some opportunity for freedom from the intrusion of the 'noise' of everyday life and the demands of others.

Key words: silence, stillness, schools, community, Quaker.

Introduction

In this paper we draw on data from a small-scale qualitative research study to investigate the perceptions of secondary age students of shared community silence in a Quaker school. 'Quaker' is a term commonly used to refer to the Religious Society of Friends. We explore understandings of the value that community silence may have both for individual students and for the corporate life of the school. The practice of positive or 'strong' silence in the sense developed by Lees (2012), allows students to be themselves in a space 'owned' by them. By 'silence' we do not simply mean an absence

of sound. Silence is 'a whole world in and of itself, alongside of, woven within language and culture but independent of it. It comes from a different place altogether.' (Maitland, 2009, p.279).

Insights from students' perspectives help to develop understandings which may have the potential to inform thinking about future school practices. The sense of control that students can gain through silent time, where they have freedom to occupy a space that is not directed for them by other people's agendas, may have links to Ruti's idea of our quest for 'authenticity'. Ruti suggests that 'there is arguably something about the contemporary cultural moment', including 'an accelerated pace of life, many different demands on our time and attention, a surface-oriented tone of personal interactions' which makes us more acutely aware of a feeling of personal inauthenticity (Ruti, 2009, p.30-31). Authenticity is about being true to our own selves and yet 'Many of us are acutely aware of the fact that the Western drive to place persons, things, meanings, and values into tidy categories' can 'repress whatever does not correspond to its classificatory paradigms.' (Ruti, 2009, p.28-29).

Our research participants appeared to be at different stages of familiarisation with the practice of silence This appeared to move through strangeness and uncertainty as to how to use the silence and a sense of embarrassment when participating in it, to a more developed sense that they had learnt their own ways of engaging with it. We might say that they had begun to develop a 'relationship with silence' (Lees, 2012). The path appeared to lead to the silence becoming almost instinctive and something which some students contemplated continuing with after leaving the school. The path seemed 'uncomfortable' for some until they had adjusted to participation in a silent space of which they felt that they had some 'ownership'.

Maitland (2009, p.3) has suggested that we live 'noisy lives' where "'alone' and 'lonely' have become almost synonymous; worse, perhaps, 'silent' and 'bored' seem to be moving closer together too. Children disappear behind a wall of noise, their own TVs and computers in their own rooms; smoking carriages on trains have morphed into 'quiet zones' but even the people sitting in them have music plugged directly into their ears." Little wonder perhaps then that our relationship with silence can be ambiguous: 'We romanticise silence on the one hand and on the other feel that it is terrifying, dangerous to our mental health, a threat to our liberties and something to be avoided at all costs.'(Maitland, 2009, p.3). Exposure to silence may therefore be an uncomfortable experience for some, whilst others may experience it quite differently as a time of healing and calm.

We suggest that ownership of shared silent space and self-directed use of silence may be a means to support students to connect with their inner selves and develop resilience and well-being. For older students facing the pressures of academic study and external examinations, silence appeared to provide opportunity to 're-centre' and they developed a respect for the importance and benefit that this had for them. However, we recognise that silence is complex. We each experience silence differently and there can be a 'dark side' (Maitland, 2009). On this occasion Maitland recalls most vividly her experience of silence as a form of panic, as 'stripping me down, desiccating, denuding me. I could hear the silence screaming.'(p81). For a student experiencing particular anxieties or a depressive state for example, silence may not therefore be one of calm and peace and so we should be mindful of the potential negative effects which silence may have on one's emotional state.

In our study students differentiated between 'comfortable' silence which put them at ease and promoted a sense of purposeful calm, and 'awkward' silence more typically used as a method of behaviour management. 'Awkward' silence was also seen by students as silence which is interrupted by distraction or shuffling. 'Awkward silence which no one really enjoys' was contrasted by our respondents with the 'quiet 'calm' type of silence which they enjoyed much more.' Students felt a sense of deep attachment to the quiet calm type of silence and they expressed this in terms of their custodianship of the silence, with them 'looking after' shared silent space.

There appear to be two components to participating together in silence: the individual alone with their own thoughts; and a strong community connectedness with others. As one respondent said, 'Your silence relates to everyone'. What emerged from this study was that silence appears to be a deeply relational experience.

Background for the study

The research took place in an English school with a Quaker foundation. Quakers hold meetings for worship at which those attending sit together in silent stillness, broken if a person is moved to share their thoughts, a reading or other reflections with those present. In the stillness 'We look for a sense of connection with those around us, with our deepest selves, with God. As we feel this sense of connection grow stronger, we may begin to see the world and our relationships in a new way.' (Quakers in Britain, How Quakers Worship, n.d.). In this school a whole school Meeting for Worship takes place first thing in the morning once per week and the silence may last for about fifteen minutes. The venue is the large school hall which is plainly furnished and the seating is arranged in a square formation with staff and students sitting together. Teaching staff

and students all attend and ancillary domestic staff are welcomed and may also attend when duties allow and always at the beginning of term. At other times too there are meetings which invariably contain at least a few minutes of silence. All whole school meetings and most staff meetings for example will include a period of silence often at the beginning and end. Whilst the school has Quaker principles, it admits children from a variety of religious backgrounds and none. However, all students are expected to attend the Meetings for Worship.

The nature of silence whilst hard to capture has been evoked in art and poetry. Beckett took works of art as a stimulus for contemplating silence. Whilst it can be difficult to capture the nature of silence as something other than simply the absence of sound, we may attempt to differentiate its forms. Silence can be productive and creative, a 'rich emptiness' (Beckett, 1995, p.20), a time of creative stillness. It can also be an empty or what we might refer to as a 'thin' silence, a barren experience. Picard (1948) tried to capture the nature of silence in contradictions, for example being 'not visible, and yet its existence is clearly apparent', 'intangible' even though directly felt, and whilst evading definition in words, still 'definite and unmistakable' (p.18).

For students silence may be 'thin' or 'uncomfortable' when they are unused to this silent space and they may be unsure how to fill the time. This is perhaps akin to Lees' (2012) conceptualisation of 'strong' and 'weak' forms of silence in schools. The former is a positive and constructive silence (p. 9). However, the latter is negative, a 'nonsilence – not silence' (p.59) for example as in silence that is coerced, used as a tool for control, to allow teacher-talk to dominate. Lees' argument is that 'silence in schools should be the strong kind because only the strong kind is positive and truly silence.' (Lees,2012, p.67). Forrest (2013) refers to willing silence and to imposed negative forcible silence, suggesting that 'We might say that *to silence* is to abuse silence by

colonising a person's potential to act free from coercion.' (p.610). Prompted by her

contemplations on works of art, Beckett (1995) reflects on some of the qualities of

silence and the importance of how we choose to engage with it. Silence reveals our

innerness for 'It is only when we are still, when we open up to our inner reality, that the

things in our life fall into coherence for us.' (p.33).

Silent group meeting for worship as a feature of Quakerism was of particular

interest to our investigation into community silence. Smith (1998) argues that for

Quakers what is shared in group silence is ourselves with others and with God. 'There is

a relationship between silence and faith' Picard (1948, p.227) has maintained, and in the

Quaker Meeting silence has a special place. The faith element for Picard appears to be

silence as a means to approach the mystery of God. However, without the faith element

silence can be a part of shared human experience. Lees (2012, p.77) reminds us that the

ability to be in silence and to have, or develop, a silent state of mind is something that

we all share.

Smith (1998, p.26) suggests that finding silence can be challenging in modern

life and that "The profound Quaker concept of shared silence is gaining recognition in

an age dominated by chatter" and is therefore of value to Quakers and non-Quakers

alike. The practice of community silence as the focus for this study conceptualises

community silence as space for the self to be still and space to share in silence in

company with others. Macmurray (1999, p.157) defined community in terms of 'a unity

of persons as persons' and Fielding and Moss (2011) tell us that "Macmurray is at pains

to point out that the unity of community for which he is arguing is '…a unity of

persons. Each remain a distinct individual; the other remains really other. Each realizes

himself in and through the other'" (Macmurray, 1961, p.58 as cited in Fielding and

Moss, 2011, p.51). In Quaker tradition, the concept of community in the 'gathering'

together for worship has significance. Although individuals meet in stillness and silence for worship, it is the being together with others which is significant.

The study

The setting was a Quaker school where community silence was an established practice and thus served the purposes of the study. One of the researchers was an 'insider' being a teacher and also member of the senior leadership team at the school, and this is important to acknowledge in terms of researcher positionality. Sikes and Potts (2008, p.3) describe people who might be considered to be 'insiders' as those 'who, before they begin their research, already have an attachment to, or involvement with, the institutions or social groups in, or on, which their investigations are based.' The other researcher as a university academic researcher was an 'outsider' and being an 'outsider' and less familiar with the setting, participated in a community silence prior to the research commencing in order to understand this better.

Data were collected via focus group interviews conducted with 15 students in total in three mixed gender focus groups: 11-14 years; 14 -16 years and 16-18 years. The groups therefore included a spread of students across Years 7 to 13 ranging from sixth formers to younger students with less experience of the school communal silences.

The focus group interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and then analysed for meanings. As a data collection method the focus group was chosen to enable individuals to explore their own views in the context of a small group (Newby, 214, p.366). As the community silence is both an individual and a shared community experience, a group context was considered an appropriate site for data collection. The interview schedule focused on broad areas which had relevance to all age groups. These were 'Purpose and Practice' of silence and 'Experience' of silence. Within these two broad areas specific questions were framed and these were piloted prior to finalising

them. The schedule of questions is appended. Participants were sent the questions in advance so that they could reflect on these beforehand.

Before data collection began, approval was obtained through the academic researcher's university research ethics processes together with gatekeeper permission from the headteacher at the school and parental and student informed consents. Students were offered an opportunity to opt in if they wished to participate in the research. Ethical research practice was adhered to not just in the initial granting of permissions but in the design and conduct of the study.

Whilst a case study approach is said to be a good approach when seeking in-depth understanding and where the researcher can clearly identify cases with boundaries (Cresswell, 2007, p.74), case studies are often prolonged in-depth studies drawing on multiple forms of data. This small scale study might be more appropriately termed an illustrative case example. Whilst we are not claiming that this is generalizable to other settings, this case example may have some wider 'relatability' for others in their own contexts.

Findings and discussion

The findings are presented in this section and are exemplified through the selection of quotes from the data. Broadly framed themes were derived from the data. The first relates to the concept of students developing their own ways to interact with silence. This path appeared to lead students to an appreciation of the value that silence can have in their own lives and in the life of the school community. A second theme to emerge was the importance of places and spaces for the experience of shared silence.

A relationship with silence

Students appeared to recognise that they had needed to learn how to relate to the practice of silence as a regular feature of life in the school community. Students told us 'when you're younger you don't appreciate it at all' and 'you don't want to sit in silence, you want to fidget', but their experience had been that they had 'grown into it'. Having been told that the silence is valuable and part of belonging to the institution, some students felt in reality they had initially been unsure of its purpose, whereas others arrived with a clearer understanding. One student said 'I knew it was a Quaker school but I didn't know about the silence when I first came here', and another that 'I knew there were silent meetings but I didn't know how long they lasted for or how often they were but I knew that [there was … like] they did exist and they were used here on a regular basis.' Others were more acquainted with silent meetings having come from Quaker families or through having an older sibling who attended the school.

Silence may therefore be 'awkward' until students learn to direct its use for themselves. It may also be the case that the younger students may be less habituated with the practice of silence, although this was mixed as some had previously attended junior schools where silent meetings were a feature of school life. Students from Quaker families were also more familiar with the use of silence. However, there was a sense that the silence became more 'comfortable' and important to students as they went through the school, to a point where they began to see themselves as having a role as curators of the silence for everyone else:

'As I have matured and progressed through the school I have become fonder on the community silence and is no longer a chore. When I first arrived [at … in lower school room] silent meeting has seen as something which went on for ever and was a waste of time. Whereas now I see silence as a period of time where I can relax, reflect and gather my thoughts.'

From the students' experiences of the shared communal silences there was a sense that they felt involved productively in a calm space, having some similarity perhaps to the idea of 'sanctuary' (Salwak, 2014) where the peaceful atmosphere and simple surroundings offer freedom from distraction and noise. Picard conceptualised silence as 'towering above all the puny world of noise' (p22). Students spoke of their busy lives and the value of communal shared silence as a space to be settled and as one student put it, 'to relax the mind', whilst other interviewees experienced it as 'some time just to be you' and 'time to take a step back'. Another student told us:

> 'Silence is more valuable in today's world than we think it is, outside of the silence there's so much stuff you could be doing, on your phone, speaking to other people, but having our silence, our community silence, is a chance for us to get away from the sort of rush and busyness that we face in our lives outside of it; it's a chance for us to just think and I think that is more important than we think it is.'

One respondent felt that 'it's a nice way to get calm and start thinking about things rather than when everyone is busy, it's a nice contrast to the rest of the day.' Another student reported that: 'In the silence I gather my thoughts and prepare mentally for the day. I use it as a time to reflect on the past day and any thoughts that come into my head.' Students spoke of silence making them 'more aware of things so it makes you think and consider what you're doing more', of 'building up some sort of care for everything.' The quality of the silence was described as:

> 'very very personal and I think that's the thing I like most about it, that no one is telling you what to think, the only thing you are being told is to sit in silence, it's like an untold instruction. I think, it's like you can think about irrelevant things or very important things, it's completely up to you but it's what you chose to think about.'

Reflection time in a calm space may allow students to shift the focus of their minds from the reactive to the contemplative. Whereas in other aspects of school life students felt more directed in their use of time, the silent time was for them to direct for themselves. This self-directed use of the silence is captured in the words of one student who felt that they could:

> 'do with silence what we want to, so we all have different things that we do in silence and I don't think the school telling us what you could think or should think in silence would help us. I think it's something you work out, what you can use your silence for.'

There appeared to be a sense in which silence allowed students some self-determination. Its use can't be pre-specified nor its form prescribed. As Lees has noted, 'the contemplative attitude cannot be coerced or cajoled into action just because a schooling system has recognised its usefulness.' (p.110). Another student suggested that unlike in Church services where there is normally a sermon to teach and instruct the worshippers' thoughts, their school silence is for the students to choose to use it as they will. The respondent conveyed a strong sense of their 'ownership' of the silence as belonging to them.

This view was shared by others for example 'I think that school telling us what we could do would hinder our silence more than it would help us because it would maybe make the silence not your own.' Whilst there was mention of some gratitude for themes introduced by staff as something which aided deeper thought on issues which until that point the student may not have considered, it was also clear that part of the power of the silence appeared to lie in the way in which they could share the silent space with others yet each at the same time experiencing this as uniquely personal to them: 'You have your own unique thoughts as well so you know you don't have to think what other people are thinking. You can think whatever you want.' This idea of a

personal silence bringing a sense of connectedness as a community is inherent in the Quaker idea of individuals in a 'gathered' meeting where a feeling of belonging to a group develops, in the sense of 'becoming fused in something bigger than the sum of the parts' (Thomas R Bodine, 1980 as cited in The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain 2009, p.2.47).

A sense of their role as curators and custodians of silence was conveyed when students spoke of 'collectively sharing the silence' because 'together you own it and you've all got to look after it.' One student thought that 'if you appreciate it and you keep silent … then you are connected through it, sort of. It can feel both a solitary experience and a collective experience.' Another respondent spoke of how the shared silence unites the school community whilst others suggested that 'because we are all in there together, sitting together… it helps connect everyone in the school' and 'it does make you feel more comfortable with everyone in the school because you're all together.' One respondent summed it up:

> 'It's because everyone is doing it - it's not like other people are in lessons and they're getting on with their day - … the whole community stands still for the period of the morning meeting. So it feels you don't have anything else you should be doing or are obliged to be doing, you've got that time with everyone.'

The community silence allowed students 'to connect with people around them' in a distinct way. They felt that this was a unique means to make connections as a community which they said they couldn't otherwise do. One respondent told us: 'I definitely feel part of the silence like you are connected to everyone else in the room, you're all reflecting'. Another reported that- 'I feel part of the silence and the community when I am sitting in meeting in a morning. It enables me to 'spiritually' connect to the people around me, and tune in to the mood of the meeting and the direction it is heading.'

These ideas also reflected something of the democratic aspects of silence which is discussed in the work of Lees (2012, p.75) who suggests that 'Silence, if embedded in a school, softens authoritarianisms and fosters democratic features'. In this school the gathered silence is practiced with staff and students seated together with seating in a square arrangement, all participating in the same activity which students perceived unites the school community and in which each has an equal and active part to play. One student remarked 'It's like all sides of the square are equal so everyone is equal in that square' and another suggested that:

> 'It's quite a strange feeling, so many of you all from different years; teachers and everyone, sometimes the cleaners come in, it does feel like a community. Everyone is comfortable around each other. Everyone can sit there and think about what they want to think about but it does make you feel like a bit more of a community.'

Another student also felt that in the silent meetings distinctions based, for example, on age were somehow eroded and they felt more comfortable together:

> 'Even though if you're younger and you're sat with people from the same school who are way older than you or if you're at the top of the school and your sitting with people way younger than you it does make you feel more equal and more comfortable with everyone you end up being in the school with because you're all together.'

In the reflections of some of the older students they acknowledged the value of the practice of silence:

> 'I think as we'll be leaving in about three months the periods of silence is one of the many things I'll miss about the school. I think looking back it's just one thing I took for granted for years, you don't really appreciate it, you don't really understand it but over the years you come to understand it and really appreciate the time'.

Other students felt that the silence had changed them in some ways, helping them to feel more settled or more connected to others. For example: 'I like the community silence because it brings the whole school body together, students and teachers. It allows people to express their views and connect with people through the silence.' Another student told us: 'I think silence would lose something for me if it wasn't a community silence, the fact that everyone comes together is all part of it, I think it makes up the silence for me.'

Some students felt that they may continue the journey after leaving school by embedding the use of silence in their everyday lives. One student for example responded with 'Yes, I'll definitely try to make silence in my day, it's really good' and another similarly felt 'I will probably want to in the future, whether I do will depend on all sorts but I think it would be a very good idea to try..'

As mentioned previously, students referred to having developed a sense of each silence having its own character or quality, which was referred to as silence having a particular 'mood':

> 'When everyone is silent I think you can feel the mood of the silence, there's different types of silence, happy silence, sad silence, depending on the mood of things which allows you to engage with everyone else around you'.

Another student told us it can feel different, depending on 'what mood you're in.' Students believed the mood could be created by recent events, for example the communal silence on Remembrance Day or by the location for the silence. This leads us to the next theme.

Places and spaces for silence

Some students shared their views of the school hall as the location for the weekly whole school silent meetings. The layout was considered appropriate:

> 'I think the layout is good because no one is at the front or on the stage, everyone is equal and like the Quakers everyone is facing each other as well …'

However students had suggestions regarding acoustics and lighting, for example one student told us: 'in terms of silence I don't know if it was built for silence but it has echoes and all sounds get reflected around it so it's not the ideal venue for silence but it's used due to its size' and another suggested:

> 'In my opinion the meeting hall does not have many characteristics that make it an appropriate space for silence because it is dark and enclosed which creates tension and may increase the chance of people losing focus. A characteristic which makes it appropriate for the community is its size and its ability to be easily accessed.'

This impacted on this student's experience of the silence. Whilst there were aspects of the community silence that they liked they also reported that: 'I don't like the silence because the venue is not fit for purpose due to lack of natural light and background noise.' However others took a different view, as for example:

> 'It is more comfortable in the hall because everyone has got a seat and its set out in a Quaker square so it's just a more comfortable environment to be in than if you're in the dining room where some people don't have chairs and they're sitting on the floor, so it's more comfortable.'

Locations outdoors for community silence were vividly recalled with a heightened feeling of closeness to one another and to nature, for example one student suggested: 'I think the whole thing about Quakerism and silence is the simplicity of it and I think the use of outside really makes that, you really feel it more.'

One student described how having climbed a volcano the students gathered in silence at the top:

> 'On a school trip, we had a meeting on top of a volcano which was really nice. We had all got up there together and we'd achieved something, it was just feeling really close.'

Another student shared a memory of silence in the outdoors on a hill in an off-site outside setting where:

> 'we sat in silence and it was a really nice atmosphere with nature and it's a lot more pleasant in some ways because you don't have the distraction of other people … you don't have to be in a room with other people to experience silence … I think the whole thing about Quakerism and silence is the simplicity of it and I think the use of outside really makes that, you really feel it more.'

Other students agreed the outdoors offered another dimension to the silence. There appeared to be a sense in which through the practice of communal silence in the outdoors, the sounds and environment of the external world amplified the silent experience to encompass and be encompassed by the environment and situation of the silence:

> 'When we went on a trip in year 7 we went to a forest and we stopped for about 2 or 3 minutes and we just listened to our surroundings and when you stopped and focussed it was quite powerful. It was like there were so many different noises, they weren't distracting but they were there and you don't normally notice them like if you're not silent and I think that the fact that it gives you time to see things is quite interesting'

Picard (1948:138) suggested that 'The things of nature are filled with silence. They are like great reserves of silence.' The noises of nature appeared not to disturb the

experience of silence for the students and their words suggest a sense of nature adding to the shared sensation of self in relationship with others and with nature.

Conclusions

In this investigation we examined the use of communal silence in the school setting through the eyes of the students, our aim was to learn from their perspectives. This investigation may offer insights with potential to guide school reform and thought about how shared silent space might help students to develop a sense of control over their own lives, connecting too with their inner selves. It may also guide thinking about community and democracy in schools. There may be much that we can learn from Quaker schools about these things. Lees' (2012) ideas about silence for democratic outcomes and student empowerment inform our thoughts on this too. Lees' argument is that

 'Silence demands humility in its users: no-one can command silence to behave in a certain way. It puts people in their place, but not a place in a hierarchy. The powers of silence in schools do not belong to those with power. They just are.' (p124).

Similarly Picard (1948) has alluded to the greatness of silence 'simply because it is. It *is*, and that is its greatness, its pure existence.' (p.17).

The title of Stone's book about stillness and spiritual awareness practices *'Don't just do something, sit there'* is itself a reminder of the place of spaces for stillness, for sitting and becoming more connected with the inner world of the self. Silent space to simply 'sit there' perhaps offers an opportunity 'to undo externalisation of the self' (Lees, 2012, p.106).   Our study suggests that this space can be both personal and

interpersonal. The former by nurturing both a deeper connection to the inner self and the latter through the connectedness of self and others in shared silent community. This may be that to which Lees' alluded in her belief in the power of silence to offer release from imposed structure and prescription: 'Silence provides a structure-less background for spontaneity of mind and self to arise' (Lees, 2012, p.110).

The calmness and stillness of silence and the opportunity to 'sit there' and experience silence may have particular value to students in 'an age dominated by chatter' (Smith 1998, p. 26) and in a digital age of social media and mobile communications. It may allow them to gain a sense of perspective, to turn their thoughts inwards and to be still in community with others, as suggested by one of the students who said: 'the collective silence helps your individual silence if that makes sense, so everyone else is silent it helps you to think about what you want to think about yourself'. We suggest that community silence can be an experience of creative stillness characterised by an openness to our inner reality, bringing coherence to our lives (Beckett, 1995, p. 33).

We tentatively suggest that there may be two areas where this study could offer some insights to which others may be able to relate.

Firstly, in today's world there are few silent spaces and in schools few opportunities for young people 'just to be themselves' and to be open to their inner lives. Our study suggests that productive involvement in shared silent space may offer students the opportunity to experience a sense of control, self-direction and 'personal authenticity'. Regarding the latter, we referred earlier to the work of Ruti (2009:30), and to the idea of a search for personal authenticity and its importance when we feel the weight and demands of 'the contemporary cultural moment'. Lees (2012:106) has identified silence as providing 'spaces for escape from being locked into a code of

expectations, assumptions, demands and can thus make schooling a personal journey.'
As Lees suggests, silence can act to 'undo externalisation of the self.'   Our study
suggests that there may be value in schools nurturing and encouraging spaces for the
inner self. Indeed Lees suggests that 'Schools are not good at promoting the idea that
humans have an interior world.' (p.122).

Secondly, we suggest that the practice of shared silence in the positive sense
referred to in the concept of 'strong' silence, may act both as a rich space for the
individual, conceptualised by Maitland (2009, p.26) as 'the interior dimension to
silence, a sort of stillness of heart and mind which is not a void but a rich space', and as
a relational space which may help to promote a sense of bonding the school community
together.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

Purpose and practice

(1) What did you know about the use of silence at [name of school] before you came to the school?

(2) Did this influence your/your parents' decision to send you here?

(3) Can you suggest reasons for why the school has periods of silence where everyone sits together in quiet? (Perhaps link to spirituality if this arises)

(4) Where are they?

(5) When are they?

(6) Do the spaces have any characteristics which make them appropriate for silence?

(7) Have you experienced the use of silence in any other parts of the school/on any visits or field trips?

(8) Have you experienced the use of community silence in any other school/place?

(9) Do teachers use silence in lessons?

(10) Are there any differences between the types of silence used? (Purpose, feel)

(11) How are the silences enforced?

Experience

(12) Do you like the community silences? Why/why not?

(13) What do you/don't you like about them?

(14) What do you do in/with the silences?

(15) How do you feel during the silence?

(16) Does this change? (Question hopefully eliciting responses of quality of silence, shuffling etc)

(17)   Do silences make any difference to your day/how you lead your life?

(18)   Silence and the community - Do you feel part of the silence/separate from it?

(19)   Do these silent periods have any effect on the school as a community? If so,

       what?

(20)   Do communal silences in meeting feel any different from silences in class?

(21)   Have you ever felt moved to speak in a silent meeting?

(22)   If you have been on a trip where you were in a period of communal silence, how

       did this feel? Where was it? (Anecdote)

(23)   Are there enough silent spaces in school?

(24)   Why/why not?

(25)   Have you any suggestions for more spaces and their use?

(26)   How should teachers use silence in lessons?

(27)   How would you feel if we got rid of communal silence in school?