'Communicating Quietly: Supporting Personal Growth with Meditation and Listening in Schools'

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This article argues that meditation and therapeutic listening have a place in school. The article starts by summarising the findings of PhD research into exclusion which gave rise to this argument and then goes on to explain exactly what is meant by the words: 'meditation' and ' therapeutic listening'. In defining the words, details of how the methods could be used by young people and adults in schools are given. Case studies and comments from students are used to illustrate the effects that the two methods have on self-esteem, emotional literacy and attachment and why these are important.

Key words: **meditation, talking, listening, awareness, emotions.**

Introduction

The following article derives from research carried out between 1999 and 2005. At the time that it started there was a national concern with boys' underachievement and exclusion (Woolf, 2000; Francis, 1999; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998; Foster et al, 2001) so I set out to investigate why boys were getting excluded more than girls. I will use the word 'excluded' to mean the formal process through which a pupil is asked not to attend school for a period of time as a result of behaviours that the school found to be unacceptable. I was not able to interview pupils who had been permanently excluded as they never returned to the school, and although some pupils were excluded on several occasions I only interviewed them once. I will use the phrase; 'exclusion incident'to mean the actual sequence of events that lead to the exclusion. I did not research informal or self-exclusion.

The school was an 11-16, co-educational, secondary, comprehensive with a predominantly white intake and was the only school in the town, drawing pupils from the surrounding villages. About one in three school's families, were headed by a single parent, usually the mother. The area was designated an Education Action Zone (EAZ) from 2000 to 2005 due to its social, cultural and economic deprivation.

The research evolved in two phases each of which lasted about a year. During the period of the field research 95 different pupils were excluded. 70% (67) agreed to be interviewed for the first phase. 21% (14) of those interviewed were girls, 1.5% (1) of those interviewed were either of mixed race or 1.5% (1) Asian, 9% (6) of the students interviewed were educated in the learning support department, all of which were boys. If students mentioned other exclusions in their interview I did include this data in the findings so there are more exclusions discussed than there are pupils interviewed. I interviewed nearly four times as many boys as girls, fifty three in total; two in year 7, eight in year 8, twelve in year 9, eighteen in year 10 and eleven in year 11.

As a consequence of the themes which emerged from the interviews, I facilitated action research projects that allowed me to test out the themes but also to find ways of working in a practical and positive way with them. I wrote, taught and refined a lower school drama curriculum which developed emotional literacy, self-esteem, awareness and attachment. Eight boys interviewed in phase one attended an anger management group which was led by a trained psychotherapist for two hours a week half-termly. Finally a colleague and I put together a club called 'self discovery through art and drama' for year 4 and 5 pupils at risk of exclusion at a primary feeder school.

Causes of exclusion

The research showed that all of the young people who were excluded had experienced a loss, or threat of loss of some of their basic needs for safety, belonging or identity (Maslow, 1954). For some pupils, the threat, or loss was only in the moment of the exclusion, for others there were also losses or threats in the recent or historic past.

These losses led to feelings including fear, anger and sadness. Losses were more easily born if there were close attachment figures in the young person's life. If there were none, or if there were multiple losses or threats, then the likelihood increased of pupils being excluded. This was especially the case where pupils had violent carers. These violent behaviours would be carried into school and acted out. Due to the way that some boys constructed their masculine identity, anger was often the only emotion which they permitted themselves to feel or show. Anger often led into conflict situations and a confrontational, power-based style of teaching was likely to trigger explosions of anger over which the boys felt they had no control. The anger catharted in exclusion incidents was partly generated in that moment, but often had links to the past. Teachers who used behaviours which communicated an attitude of respect and caring, whilst still maintaining fair and transparent boundaries, were less likely to induce conflict and were more able to build attachments with pupils, which in turn reduced the likelihood of conflict as the pupils felt safer.

Girls were less likely to be excluded as the construction of femininity, allowed for the expression of fear and sadness, but not anger. Often any strong feelings, including anger, were shared by talking to friends. For some boys talking about feelings was seen as being too feminine, and so they would cathart all of their feelings physically, sometimes through sport, but often through violence. Even though boys had friends, these relationships were based on sharing behaviours which maintained the image of masculinity they desired. As a result, no real attachments were built, so there was no opportunity to share and trust another person with one's feelings and experiences.

Working with the causes of exclusion

I will now go on to argue that allowing pupils to meditate and to talk and be listened to in a certain way allows them to work with their feelings and experiences so that they build attachments, emotional awareness and self-esteem in themselves and others. I will discuss meditation first as I feel that the awareness gained in meditation allowed for more fruitful and authentic talking and listening afterwards.

Meditation

First of all I want to clarify what meditation is not: it is not religious, it is not brainwashing or dogmatic, no-one else takes control of us, it is not harmful. At its most simple, meditation is simply the practice of watching one's breath rise and fall. Law (2004, p.104) offers a succinct summary of his approach to 'witnessing' and Ken Wilber (1985) and Jack Kornfield (1994) provide practical exercises for beginners. There are many books on meditation on the market today, but I have found it most helpful to join meditation groups or to listen to tapes which guide me.

If you were to try this now for a minute or so, you would find that thoughts pop into your mind, feelings will arise and physical sensations occur, all of which distract us from watching our breath. This is normal! We notice our distractions but we don't get involved in them, we just let them pass and come back to watching the breath and slowly, the distractions lessen. In schools where meditation is part of the curriculum the effects have been positive. 'Restful alertness' was the feeling observed in the Maharishi School (Snow, Friday 31st January 2003, TES), whilst another teacher who led meditations reported; 'I have noticed my children beginning to take charge of their learning, both emotionally and mentally' (Gatherings, London Borough of Redbridge, Autumn, 2003).

In the USA, where three schools practice transcendental meditation (TM) daily, it was found to: lower blood pressure, 'improve concentration … enhance physical and mental well being [and become] … calmer … less distracted … less stressed … less prone to violent behaviour' (Dana Micucci for the International Herald Tribune, Tuesday 15th February, 2005, Washington). It was also found to be the 'best medicine for hyperactive students' (The Examiner, March 17th 2005, Washington). The principal of one of the schools, called the meditation practice his 'stress management programme…behaviour problems went down and attendance went up' (www.tm.org). Students from the university of Michigan studied 160 middle school pupils who meditated twice a day and found 'students were happier, had higher self-esteem, handled stress better and got along better with other students'.

In my research I used meditation in a number of ways. Firstly, I used it myself before the interviews and group projects and lessons. I found that it allowed me to become aware of my thoughts, feelings and sensations. As a consequence of this awareness I was able to 'own' my feelings (Crary, 1995, p.77). This meant that I admitted to myself that they were *my* emotions which are *my* responsibility. For example, rather than thinking 'he made me angry', I would be able to own that 'I feel angry'. This made me calmer, which was important for pupils; 'he just spoke calm and didn't snap which made me feel secure'. Not only did my calmness encourage calmness in others, but so too did it allow pupils to relax. Meditation does not reduce the intensity of one's feelings (it can amplify them), but it does allow us to separate the feeling from our need to act it out.

As well as using meditation myself, in year 7 drama we used meditation techniques before we started circle-time in order for individuals to become aware. Sometimes, instead of simply watching the breath, I used a grounding exercise to bring one's attention into one's body and the contact one's body makes with the chair, floor, environment around it. Law (2004) describes grounding as 'being simultaneously aware of internal sensations and external events' (p.102). This awareness is good for bringing attention into the present moment and away from any past experiences, whether recent past or historic; 'if you've had a really bad day or a fight of something it calms you down'.

After watching the breath and grounding, I might centre pupil's attention in their bodies. I would ask them to bring their awareness to their body to see if there was any tension; were they clenching their fist? Were their shoulders hunched? Was their jaw tight? Then I would ask them to focus on these tension points and imagine them filling with fresh air and relaxing before going back to breathing in and out. 'If I was angry when I was coming into the room it made me really calm down and I relaxed when I was doing it'.

I sometimes used more physical techniques with students, especially when their energy was high. I would ask them to stand in a space on their own with their hands by their side, their eyes closed and their feet hip width apart. As we breathed in I would ask them to bring their arms slowly up the side of their body until at the end of the in breath they were stretched as high above their heads as possible. Then as we breathed out I asked (and showed) them to bring their arms out to the side (as if following the arc of a circle) and back down to the starting position. The physical movements had to last as long as the breath; 'it calmed people down and got them ready for what they were doing'.

Students reported a variety of affects as a result of the meditation. One of the most common comments was that the students found that it allowed them to calm down or leave emotional baggage behind. For some pupils it provided an internal 'time out' allowing them to escape from school and daydream for a few moments before returning refreshed:

> You just get away … it really gets rid of that stress that's been happening all through the day. I just forget all the bad stuff.

Some pupils became more aware of their physical state, for example, often pupils noticed how thirsty they were, something which could immediately remedied. Meditation was found to relieve stress and increase mental clarity:

> In a lesson … before a test, cos you're really tense cos you want to do well … so if you do your breathing it helps calm you down so you're not stressed by the test and you're not so nervous. Cos if you're nervous you get a worse mark cos you want to do it quick and get it over with. But if you are trying to stay calm it is easier cos you don't rush and you want to do your best to concentrate.

To relate these findings back to the causes of exclusion, it become clear that meditation offers people a chance to take time to calm down, become aware and to think before acting or speaking. The reduction of stress meant that we were less likely to behave in ways which hurt ourselves and others. We were more able to think about what we needed and so had the opportunity to ask for these needs to be met. We were all more able to own our emotions which meant that we were less likely to take our feeling out on others which avoided conflict. When painful or uncomfortable thoughts and feelings arose we noticed them but let them pass and in returning to the breath we kept our attention in the present moment.

Therapeutic listening

More and more schools have pupil councils, learning mentors, buddies, reviews and evaluations all of which are meant to be opportunities to build self-esteem and lessen stress. However, I would argue, that in practice, many of these opportunities are hurried and replicate the power dynamic of the classroom where teacher knows the answer and pupils listen. SEBS and SEELS are emotional literacy initiatives currently under trial (see www.antidote.org.uk), however, for me, any technique which aims to support people has to be used congruently.

For my interview technique I drew largely on my counselling training to use active listening skills and Carl Rogers' three core conditions which he said were necessary for growth. These were 'unconditional positive regard' (UPR) which he defines as 'acceptance and caring for [an individual] … as a separate person with permission to have his [or her] own feelings and experiences' (Rogers, 1961, p.283). UPR is the ability to accept the *person* just as they are; even if we dislike a *behaviour* or an *attitude* they hold. The second core condition is the ability to be 'empathetic' or to put oneself in another's shoes (Rogers, 1961, p.34 and p.62). The third condition is that of 'congruence' by which Rogers meant 'when the relationship … is genuine and without 'front' or façade' (Rogers, 1961, p.61). These conditions are caught and not taught therefore I aimed to model these conditions as well as encourage them in others. Rogers made the point that it is not only important to *feel* that we are maintaining the core conditions within ourselves, but that we must also *communicate* them clearly to the 'client'. *How* we listen is crucial to communicating this clearly so I used active listening skills (Egan, 1998).

Egan explained active listening to be 'listening and understanding the client's verbal messages, … observing and reading the client's nonverbal behaviour' (1998, p.66). Sometimes pupils would notice their fists were clenched or that they were tapping their feet or hugging themselves. When they were unaware of their body language I might just offer an observation 'I see your arms across your chest and your legs are crossed and I am wondering how you are feeling'. I would also summarise what they had been saying as a way of checking that I had understood properly, but also to see if the pupil wanted to focus on something they had said in more detail. Often I would ask the student to summarise themselves as this clarified for me what had been important to them.

Sometimes I had to check meanings of words, for example, I did not understand some of the local dialect ('shady' meaning 'unfair'). At other times, I was checking for clarification of connotation, for example what a 'good mate' is to me, a woman in her late thirties is very different for a thirteen year old boy. I would also ask for anecdotal examples to illustrate what they were trying to say and I occasionally challenged by questioning apparent contradictions: 'You just said you were stupid but earlier you said that Ms X was pleased with your test results in…'.

In the interviews I never sat opposite the students as this could have been perceived as confrontational, I always sat beside them and made sure that my posture was relaxed and open. At times I leant forward and throughout I maintained good eye contact. I would paraphrase some of what they said as a way of checking, clarifying and showing understanding the content of what has been said. If I had paraphrased correctly the interview moved on, if not the student clarified, I re-paraphrased and then we continued. I would also act as a mirror reflecting thought or feeling by feeding back to the student an implied interpretation: 'You're saying, I think, that when teachers shout at you, you feel furious'. I would use this as a way of checking understanding, but I also used it as a way to clarify something which has not been made specific. Sometimes in the reflection, I would amplify the feeling expressed to see if in fact the truth was stronger than the student expressed. For example one student said 'I was irritated with my mum when she let my brother go into my room'. I reflected this back as: 'So you were really angry with her for letting him do that' and the reply was: 'Yes, I was really angry', with a sudden release of energy as this was said which seemed to support the strength of the feeling.

I would invite students to narrate their stories to encourage a sense of ownership and so they could select what was important for them. By using open questions (questions which can not just be answered in one or two words), I was trying to empower students to discuss what *they* wanted. The less I controlled the interview, the quieter I was, the more the interviewees told me. The open questions and non-directive approach allowed trust to develop and it was this trust that allowed attachments to form and the young people to go beyond any gender identity to exploring their real feelings. The more congruent I was about myself and my feelings, the less I hid behind the 'teacher' or 'researcher' identity, the more congruent young people were able to be as they had more of a sense of who I really was.

The more aware I was, the more aware I allowed them to be, which then reduced the likelihood of projection and transference and so reduced the potential for misunderstanding and conflict. Projection is the process of 'disowning parts of ourselves and attributing them to others' (Clarkson, 1996, p.48). Transference is a similarly subconscious process during which 'emotions related to a significant relationship are transferred onto another relationship, thus promoting the transfer of feelings held about one person onto another person'(Greenhalgh, 1994, p.311).

One of the big themes of the research was the way that the construction of a certain type of masculine identity lead to conflict and competition which had the effect of isolating the individual behind the constructed mask. Whereas talking about one's feelings was much more acceptable for most girls, some boys felt that to do so would be 'unmanly'. It became clear in my interviews, that even boys who defined their maleness in terms of how 'hard' they were, given the conditions above, were more able to explore

them emotions which they were not allowing themselves to feel. Having spoken, many boys reported that they felt better having 'got it off [their] chest' or 'let it out':

> Not keeping it all in … just let it out … like all the feelings.

I found that people talked more openly when they felt safe, and having secure boundaries aided this. During the one to one interviews I was able to promise a high degree of confidentiality and anonymity (I was guided by the Gillick ruling and guidelines provided by the Children's Legal Centre, 1999). In the drama classes this was not possible and in the small groups the participants contracted to confidentiality and anonymity to any one outside the group but it was impossible to enforce these boundaries. We struggled to provide locations which allowed privacy for the two small groups, but total privacy was only possible away from school, in the therapist's house. The interviews, the small groups and the drama classes all operated to a tight time boundary which was guided by the school day. Rules and consequences also provided safe boundaries for talking and listening to occur (MacGrath, 1998). My own non-negotiable rule was that no one was to do or say anything that made anyone else feel bad. Other rules were constructed by each group, by firstly jotting down in private what they needed to feel safe emotionally, physically, socially and spiritually (having first discussed what these words meant), then sharing it in a group or with a partner, and then sharing this with the whole group. Any points of contention were discussed and if necessary voted on. We focused on stating the rules in a positive way so that they were permissive rather than restrictive. Each group also decided on the consequences that would follow if these conditions were broken.

Having established the boundaries and the rules, I started to facilitate and model the listening techniques I used in the one to one interactions, in the junior school and anger groups as well as during check–in in the drama lessons:

> To check – in … I ask people how they are feeling … [it] ... helps members ... include themselves, connect with others, settle down, helps the leader assess the mood and feel of the group, gets everyone talking at the start, affirms each member as important and unique.
> (Benson, 1987, p.186/7)

We would check-in having meditated for a short while, thus allowing to focus our attention inwards and to see if there was anything we wanted to share. I modelled the behaviour I wanted to encourage and permission was given for people to 'pass' if they felt they didn't want to speak. We would listen to each person speak and if someone wanted to respond they signalled (usually by raising their hand) and asked the speaker if it was OK to ask a question, offer advice, make a comment, offer a positive word. This again was empowering for the speaker; 'you feel like everyone is listening and not just their minds wandering off', as well as allowing the listeners to see that not everyone wanted what we thought they needed; 'I enjoyed getting close to other people … if you get close they can help you'.

Sometimes pupils would have an awareness of their emotions, sometimes not, and sometimes they just did not want to talk about them at that time. When pupils were able to talk about how they were feeling this had several benefits. For me as the teacher, it meant I had more information about how I should deal with that pupil that lesson. If someone said they were angry I might be more flexible with them or ask them if they needed time out (Ilsely-Clark, 1999, p16). For the class it also meant that they could respond helpfully, for example by asking somebody what they needed. Some pupils wished to talk about how they felt after the meditation and others just asked for what they needed (for example, to be left alone, to work with a friend, to have a hug). For some pupils, the act of talking about their feelings was empowering:

It helps me talk to my mum and dad when I get home from school.

For others it was cathartic:

I could get it off my chest and tell somebody.

The pupils who worked in the smaller junior school and therapy groups described how listening to each other talk allowed them to understand and empathise with each other:

[listening to] what is hurting them, what is putting them down. Say they speak about it then they'll be more confident in themselves.

Relationships improved within the various groups as:

You know how people feel, if you've upset someone.

Talking in front of other people built confidence and was an automatic way of getting positive attention and building self-esteem. For some students check-in was a place to be listened to when they were not listened to at home:

Not keep it all in … just let it out ... like all the feelings … at home your mum is always busy and stuff.

Thus providing some of the attention they needed as well as sometimes learning behaviours which helped relationships at home.

Pupils also felt that meditation and circle-time could and should be used to start other subjects as for the reasons above. They felt that it would lead to a more positive start to each lesson:

If check-in and breathing happened in registration it would help everybody cos if you want to tell it and get it off your chest, people might understand and you might understand people more.

The above student noted the benefits of awareness and catharsis through talking rather than action. However, of equal importance was the desire for, and practice of empathy. Meditation and circle time allowed pupils to:

Get to know more people and … get to like them more cos you get to know how they feel.

Given that many conflict arise as a result of stress and tension on the part of the adult and /or the child, meditation and being listened to clearly helped create a more peaceful atmosphere by allowing awareness to arise and for feelings and perceptions to be honoured.

Kirk

I taught Kirk for GCSE drama and during this time he was excluded for letting a teacher's car tyres down at night when he was angry for being turned away from the school talent show. He didn't even know whose car it was and, as it turned out, liked the teacher involved. When I interviewed him he told me how he had seen his mother try to stab his father when he was little. His father was wrongly convicted of assault when he pushed her off but Kirk was too young to have his evidence admitted in court. He had flashbacks to the night of the attack and when his parents divorced and his father was released from prison, he chose to live with his father him as he no longer trusted his mother although he felt guilty about this.

Kirk had never spoken about these events before but frequently felt taken over by his anger. He particularly enjoyed meditations we did in drama as he felt himself calming down. On one occasion, we visualised the in breath as blue and calming and the out breath as red and carrying out any anger or tension with it. Kirk said he had imagined the devil coming out of him with the red and reported that he felt cleaner and more hopeful when he saw himself filled with blue. During the anger therapy group he was curious about the experiences of the others and was surprised and supported by the knowledge that others had had similarly brutal experiences. The more people talked, the more they encouraged others to talk:

We learnt to speak freely to each other about how we feel…it helps if you know how people feel.

In this context he was able to share how scared he was at the time of the stabbing and how angry he felt. At the end of the group he said he felt better as he knew he wasn't the only one to have lived through difficult experiences. He also said he felt that he was getting angry less often as he understood where it came from and had a technique to calm himself down; 'I'm different cos I've stopped getting into fights'.

Mikey

Mikey was in one of the year 7 drama classes. He was a lively pupil, constantly on the move, chatty, and popular. Over the course of the year Mikey enjoyed meditation and the calming effect it had on him. He relished the time when he wasn't expected to do anything for anyone. As a carer of

his mother who had multiple sclerosis he valued the time the meditation gave him to focus on his own needs; 'it helps me talk to my mum and dad when I get home from school … doing it in front of everyone gave me more confidence to tell my parents'. Often he spoke in circle time about how he felt and he challenged some of the other boys in the class who thought it wasn't manly to talk about feelings;

> It means you're not embarrassed to speak out to people again and again and again, it's not that embarrassing after a while.

On the lesson he told the class about his mother's illness, he did so with such pride and love that many of the class were moved to tears. He was happy to answer questions about the illness and what it meant for him and his family. In subsequent sessions he spoke about how much he valued the classes support and interest and how pleased he was that he had told them.

Conclusions

Meditation and therapeutic listening offer pupils a break from dealing with external information and demands and gives them the time to reflect on their affective state:

> It is a chance to concentrate … it gives you a chance to see how you feel.

Because the process of meditation is internal the boys who might usually be reluctant to get in touch with their feelings had permission to do so without losing face. Meditation was found to be calming and useful as a technique for diffusing intense emotion. It was found to encourage mental, emotional and physical well being.

Having the opportunity to be heard by listeners who model Rogers' core conditions allowed pupils to experiment with revealing parts of their 'real self' and lessened the need for the constructed identity they were used to presenting. Once people were able to let some of their 'real self' show, they encouraged other people to join them in dropping their identity. The more the process evolved, the greater was the potential for attachment. Once attachments were developed, the effects of loss and the threat of loss were lessened and so the likelihood of unhelpful behaviours decreased. The sense of belonging which the attachments gave rise to ensured that pupils built up their self-esteem and moved nearer to self-actualisation (Maslow, 1954). Talking also provided a safe release for strong emotion as well as allowing an increase in self-knowledge and personal power.

The benefits for me as teacher or researcher were manifold. I was able to reduce and manage my stress, to gain awareness of my own emotions and physical needs and to address them so as not to project or transfer them onto the students. This meant that I was more able to listen and accept the young people's behaviour without judgement and could work towards problem solving and resolution rather than conflict.

To summarise, meditative breathing allowed a greater awareness of one's own processes. It helped prevent projection and transference which made it easier to maintain Rogers' core conditions. Listening skills communicated the core conditions and allowed people to talk without being judged. The tighter the boundaries the safer the pupils felt to experiment with new ways of communicating and behaving. Boys in all of the groups showed a willingness and ability and desire to talk. The research conclusively found that meditation and therapeutic listening could and should be brought into the educational setting and that focusing on affective learning created positive conditions for effective learning.

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