

# Silent and invisible students: The importance of listening to the silence and seeing the invisible

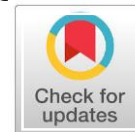
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## ABSTRACT

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In the fairytale, 'The Invisible Child', by the Finnish author Tove Jansson, the child Ninny was made silent and invisible as a result of her ill-treatment by the woman responsible for her care. A similar situation to that in the fairytale can be found in schools and other education settings where students are made both silent and invisible by their treatment by teachers and fellow classmates. The overall aim of this discussion is to explore the complexities of silence and invisibility, with a specific emphasis on silence and invisibility among students in school. The paper embraces consideration of the multifaceted phenomena of silence and invisibility, both within and beyond school. Silence, invisibility and power in society as well as in schools is discussed, with a specific focus on silence and oppression as crucial dimensions of bullying in schools, followed by an exploration of teachers use of silence. The discussion focuses attention on the silent language of response and silent and invisible students. The various ways of understanding and responding to student silence and invisibility are then explored. In conclusion the significance of silence and invisibility is discussed and the implications of this for education are considered and an argument is made for the importance of listening to the silence and seeing the invisible, as a prerequisite for making the invisible visible. Throughout the paper, the discussion is connected to, and exemplified by, the fairytale of Tove Jansson.



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## Once Upon a Time—To Start with a Fairytale

In the fairytale, 'The Invisible Child', by the Finnish author Tove Jansson, a writer famous for her stories of the Moomintrolls, the child Ninny was made silent and invisible as a result of her ill-treatment by the woman responsible for her care (Jansson, 2018). The following paragraph is a short summary of the story.

One evening the Moomin family are visited by a friend, Too-ticky. Too-ticky has brought a silent and invisible child, Ninny, for them to care for in the hope that they will be able to make her visible.

Ninny was being cared for by a family member who was so unkind that Ninny gradually faded away until she was completely invisible. Ninny is now both silent and invisible, the only sign of her presence a little silver bell around her neck. The Moomin family all welcome Ninny and are kind to her. Moominmamma makes her a pretty new dress and tries a cure from her Granny's book of potions. Ninny is very well behaved and does her best to please. Parts of her appear and then fade as she gains and then loses confidence. The Moomin children, Moomintroll and his sister, little My, try to include Ninny in their games, but Ninny doesn't know how to play or have fun. It is only when she becomes angry with Moominpappa and bites him on his tail that Ninny becomes fully and permanently visible (freely interpreted and summed up from Jansson, 2018).

A similar situation to that in the fairytale can be found in schools and other education settings where students are made both silent and invisible by their treatment by teachers and fellow classmates. In previous research the issue of silence in various educational settings is recognized (e.g., [Lees, 2012](#); [Stern, 2014](#); [Olin, 2008](#)), as is the issue of invisibility among students (e.g., [Dow, 2013](#); [Lund, Ertesvåg & Roland, 2010](#)). The question remains—how might silence and invisibility be understood and explored in connection to education and schooling?

At first glance, the notion of silence may seem unproblematic. Silence is a part of everyday life, but we are often unaware of it. We listen for sound, but rarely do we listen for silence. There are times when we long for silence, other times when silence is uncomfortable. Some of us are secure in silence. Others are not, with the result that the same silent situation can be experienced in very different ways (c.f. [Cooper, 2012](#); [Stern, 2016](#)).

Perhaps the most important consideration in connection to school settings is who is silent and the reason for their silence. Sometimes people, according to [Cleveland \(2022, in print\)](#), are silent because they choose to be so. Remaining silent can be an act of power, a refusal to engage with others, perhaps a demonstration of superiority. For others, silence is far less powerful. Given this, there can be many reasons for why a person is silent ([Bollnow, 1982](#)). In schools, many students are silent because they feel, or have been made to feel, that they have nothing of value to say ([Alerby, 2020](#)).

Silence can be chosen by the student as an act of resistance. Such students are silent but not invisible. On the contrary their silence increases their visibility as they reject the openings for engagement made available. Their determination to remain silent, to not to engage in discussion and other class activities, is problematic but perhaps not as detrimental to their well-being as students who are forced into silence. A student that has been silent for an extended period of time may become invisible. If silence has been forced upon them, such students may seek invisibility as an act of self-protection. Some students are, according to [Dagley \(2004\)](#) “actively making themselves invisible in classrooms” (p. 624). Often invisible students do nothing to attract the attention of the teacher or the other students ([Dow, 2013](#)). They are, for the most part, silent, almost never volunteering to participate in class discussion. They will answer questions if asked directly, although usually quietly and as briefly as possible. These students are to be found in the part of the classroom that [Pye \(1988\)](#) terms ‘Nomansland’ (p. 38), carefully located at the periphery of the teacher's range of sight.

If a student is both silent and invisible, is it possible for the other students and the teacher to really hear and see that person? What happens when a student in a classroom filled by other people is both present and unseen? To understand and have insight into the meaning of silence and invisibility is of great importance, not only in pedagogical settings, but for life itself.

## Overall Aim and Philosophical Approach

The overall aim of this discussion is to explore the complexities of silence and invisibility, with a specific emphasis on silence and invisibility among students in school. The exploration takes the fairytale of Tove Jansson as its foundation in discussion of the phenomena of silence and invisibility. The philosophical exploration is based on diverse philosophical directions in a rather

eclectic way. Two philosophers, however, who may stand out are the French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the German-born American philosopher, Hannah Arendt. Merleau-Ponty is best known for his theory of the lived body but he also talked and wrote about silence and invisibility, while Arendt is most famous for topics related to the nature of power and evil, but also for her work on politics and totalitarianism. Merleau-Ponty and Arendt have, from different dimensions and angles, and to varying degrees, discussed and examined both silence and invisibility (c.f. [Arendt, 1951, 1958](#); [Merleau-Ponty, 1995, 2002](#); [Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968](#)).

The paper embraces consideration of the multifaceted phenomena of silence and invisibility, both within and beyond school. Silence, invisibility and power in society as well as in schools is discussed, with a specific focus on silence and oppression as crucial dimensions of bullying in schools, followed by an exploration of teachers use of silence. The discussion focuses attention on the silent language of response and silent and invisible students. The various ways of understanding and responding to student silence and invisibility are then explored. In conclusion the significance of silence and invisibility is discussed and the implications of this for education are considered and an argument is made for the importance of listening to the silence and seeing the invisible, as a prerequisite for making the invisible visible. Throughout the paper, the discussion is connected to, and exemplified by, the fairytale of Tove Jansson (see [Jansson, 2018](#), p. 65-78).

### **The Phenomena of Silence and Invisibility Within and Beyond School**

Silence can be regarded as a multifaceted phenomenon, and has, according to Mendes-Flohr (2012) many ‘voices’ (p. 15). As stated in Stern et.al. (2022, in print), ‘silence actually refers to a number of different phenomena’ (p. 132). Silence in one form or another is always a part of our daily lives; it is impossible to completely avoid it. The question, though, is how the silence is perceived. Is silence regarded as positive or negative? Or, to put it another way, is the silence perceived as constructive or destructive? Cleveland (2022, in print) argues that silence can be experienced as a ‘double-edged sword’ (p. 150)—sometimes silence is experienced as a space of comfort, while on another occasion silence is experienced as a space of discomfort. There are times when, surrounded by sounds and noise, we long for silence. Cooper (2012) stresses, however, that silence is ‘the absence, not of sound per se, but of noise which is obtrusive or salient’ (p. 55).

Silence can, quite literally, be perceived as heavenly, something longed for and actively sought after. Sometimes, as humans we need to be in stillness and peace, and we may also wish to be freed from the attention of others for a time ([Stern, 2016](#)). When Too-ticky brings the invisible child to the Moomin family, Moominmamma recognises Ninny’s right to be silent.

‘I believe she wants to be invisible for a while. Too-ticky said she’s shy. Better leave the kid alone until something turns up.’

At other times, silence can be a forced and extremely unpleasant experience. These two angles of silence constantly work together and interact with one another, and the boundary between constructive and destructive silence is often a tenuous one. By its very nature, then, silence consists of both positive and negative values ([Cleveland, 2022](#), in print). Von Wright (2012, p. 94), emphasizes, however, that ‘[s]ilence “as such” is neither good nor bad.’ It is the way in which silence is regarded and experienced by those involved that makes it so.

### **Power as a Facet of Silence and Invisibility**

One of the inherent facets of silence is power, a facet that is not always easy to recognize ([Achino-Loeb, 2006](#)). Whether or not this power is explicit or implicit, Foucault (1978) reminds us that silence is a ‘shelter for power’ (p. 101). Throughout history individuals and groups have been silenced, and as a result of this externally imposed silence, rendered invisible. Religious movements, for example, have exercised their power to silence people, at least some of the population. In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 ([The Holy Bible](#)), Paul wrote: ‘As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says’. More recently many child victims of sexual abuse went unheard and unseen. A report to the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual

Abuse (Moore et al. 2015) emphasised the importance of actively listening to children, given that participants in the study felt that adults failed to ‘hear’ what they were saying.

Governments rarely, if ever, recognise so-called illegal migrants who, as a result, have no voice. Data collection tools such as a Census are administered via residential address, an approach that ignores the homeless, with the result that they are both silent and invisible and therefore do not need to be considered in the development of government policy. In the US, many so-called illegal migrants avoid taking part in such data collection processes for fear of drawing attention to themselves. As a result, ‘school, voting and legislative district boundaries will be based on incorrect figures. Allocation of resources for schools and communities will fail to account for the accurate number or demographics of community members’ (Lehman Heid, 2020, p. 1). It is clear that past and present practices by those in power, either deliberately or inadvertently, silence the less powerful and, in one way or another, force them into invisibility.

Those who have been silenced by oppression and power may come to believe that they have no voice and therefore no control over their situation (Freire, 2018). The forces against them are such that they are invisible in terms of the wider society. If they attempt to speak, they cannot be heard because, being invisible, no-one is listening to them. They are beyond the possibility of being able to affect the situation because they are not heard—they are silenced. Ninny, the invisible child in the fairytale, was treated in an unkind and ironic way, which resulted in invisibility, or as Too-ticky expressed it:

‘She [the woman responsible for her care] was ironic all day long every day, and finally the kid started to turn pale and fade around the edges, and less and less was seen of her [Ninny].’

### Silence and Oppression—An Act of Bullying

There are a number of reasons why silence is forced on particular individuals or groups. It can be the result of oppression, ignorance or as a demonstration of power, as is often true in the case of bullies at school and elsewhere. The call for people to speak up when they are witness to various forms of injustice is the focus of many anti-bullying programs in schools and advertising campaigns targeting domestic violence. Arendt (1958) reminds us that it is not the evil of the wicked, but the silence of the good that is dangerous. She argues that it is the silence of the good that allows evil to go unchallenged, which is particularly relevant to both the modern school setting and to other workplaces. There may be rules and policies against bullying behaviour, but one powerful aspect in bullying is silence. Bullying is both made possible and allowed to continue because of silence. It can be a component of the act of bullying itself. Individuals can be shut out of the main social group. They can be denied access to important information. They can be the focus of scornful looks and physical shunning (Forsman, 2003; Hymel & Swearer, 2015). These are all explicit acts of bullying, but harm can also come from other people not directly involved in the bullying. These are Arendt’s ‘silent good’ who, despite having seen the bullying, choose not to act (Arendt, 1958). Their silence is devastating for both the victim and the bully. The bully may understand that their behaviour is endorsed by the silent onlookers while the victim may feel that they have been betrayed by those they thought were friends. The victim of bullying—perhaps a student—may not tell anyone about it. This may be because the bullied student feels in some way responsible for what has happened. Perhaps they think that reporting the bullying will only make the problem worse. For whatever reason those who are being bullied often dare not report it to figures of authority such as the teacher or their parents (Gunnarsdottir et al, 2015). Instead, the student in question becomes and remains silent.

An issue of key importance therefore is to observe how the teachers and the other students react to and handle bullying situations in school, and also how the silent and invisible student who is the focus of this ill-treatment is cared for (c.f. Lund, Ertesvåg & Roland 2010). When Ninny first comes to the Moomin family, Moominmamma acknowledges her right to be silent and accepts Too-ticky’s description of her as shy, but this does not mean that Ninny is ignored. Rather, Moominmamma takes great care to include her in the daily routine of the family. She prepares a bed for Ninny and makes her welcome.

The eastern attic room happened to be unoccupied, so Moominmamma made Ninny a bed there. The silver bell tinkled along after her upstairs and reminded Moominmamma of the cat that once had lived with them. At the bedside she laid out the apple, the glass of juice and the three striped pieces of candy everybody in the house was given at bedtime.

Then she lighted a candle and said:

‘Now have a good sleep, Ninny. Sleep as late as you can. There’ll be tea for you in the morning any time you want. And if you happen get a funny feeling or if you want anything, just come downstairs and tinkle.’

Whatever the initial reason, this silence emanates from the fact that the student (or Ninny) has been either directly or indirectly silenced. That is, events or actions have resulted in their being silenced, and sometimes even made invisible.

There are many possible explanations for the causal link between bullying and silence. Perhaps it is the victim or the bully who is silent, or it is those who witness the bullying but fail to speak out. Whatever the situation is, given the impact and harm that can be caused by negative silence, it is imperative to pay attention to how silence is used and how it is expressed. This is especially important in the school setting where teachers have primary responsibility for the well-being of all their students. Alerby (2019) reminds us that ‘aspects of power and marginalisation in relation to silence are therefore important to recognise in education’ (p. 537).

Arendt (1958) talks about the danger of good people remaining silent; that is, failing to react and speak out against that which they see as wrong. She argues that, if silence prevails in these situations, evil becomes so commonplace that people no longer think or care about what is actually happening. That which was initially regarded as abhorrent becomes the norm. Bullying that is confronted with silence, allowed to go unchallenged for an extended period of time, can lead to desensitisation. When this happens, behaviour which was previously seen as wrong, may eventually be accepted by the majority and those who resist it become the problem (Forsman, 2003).

Bullying is not the only situation at school where silence can be used as an instrument of power. In other situations, people choose silence as a way to exercise power. For example, silence can be used by the teacher as a strategic means of expressing power.

### Teacher Use of Silence

According to Jaworski (1993), the silence of a teacher highlights their dominance over the students. He believes that teachers use silence for a variety of reasons. Silence is often used at the beginning of a lesson to attract student attention. The teacher may pause in their instructions to draw attention to students who are talking. Prolonged silence combined with a raised eyebrow or an icy stare can effectively convey disapproval and restore order in the classroom. Teacher silence can also be used to calm a tense situation where a raised or stern voice would only further exacerbate matters. Beginning teachers are often advised to explore the different ways in which silence can become part of their skill set.

The teacher has also the power to determine who should speak in the classroom. This means that the teacher controls both the talk time and the silence, or in the words of von Wright (2012), ‘[t]he educational relation tends to be structured in a way that gives teachers, not students, the power to regulate and perpetuate silence’ (p. 94). To whom does the teacher direct the question? Whose voice is heard and valued in a discussion? Whose voice is silenced? Who is made to listen rather than speak? The answer to these questions largely depends on the prevailing classroom culture and the teacher’s commitment to the inclusion of all students. There may be a culture in the classroom, or indeed within the school as a whole, where only the correct answers count. This attitude to learning results both in limiting explorative discussion and in causing students to stay silent for fear of answering incorrectly. Perhaps a student who gives an incorrect answer is met with silence by the teacher or the other students, or is treated with scorn of the ‘icily ironical kind’, as Ninny was in the fairytale. Too-ticky describes the way that this approach is used to silence Ninny.



‘Well. This Ninny was frightened the wrong way by a lady who had taken care of her without really liking her. I’ve met this lady, and she was horrid. Not the angry sort, you know, which would have been understandable. No, she was the icily ironical kind.’

However, if silence in the classroom is seen as a central part of the learning process and affects students in a positive way, it can help to solve problems and dilemmas. Rather than silence resulting in tension, it can become an aid to reflection and contemplation. Allowing time for silence can make the actual learning process easier (c.f. [Stern, 2016](#)). If the student is given a quiet moment to reflect on the subject or task this can lead to new insight and a deeper understanding of the area. By allowing silence in educational settings, quiet moments can facilitate and support decisive action and meaningful activities. The silence that can occur when students are genuinely engaged and interested in their assignments in the classroom may indicate deep thinking and reflection on the task in hand. In contrast, if the students are indifferent, perhaps their silence is signalling that their thoughts are engaged in a completely different direction than intended ([Alerby, 2020](#)).

### To Be Noticed or Not—The Silent Language of Response

Ninny was not noticed by the lady responsible for her care in that the lady did not show any concern for her. When Ninny become fully invisible, the lady’s reaction was to hand her over to Too-ticky.

Last Friday one couldn’t catch sight of her at all. The lady gave her away to me and said she really couldn’t take care of relatives she couldn’t see.

According to Pye (1988) teachers do not pay attention to the invisible students because the reward that comes from trying to engage them is minimal. Teachers need to be liked so they connect with students who feed this need. The students who are friendly, bright and display interest in the subject offer positive rewards to the teacher. Other students who are the focus of teacher attention are those who command attention, perhaps by acting out or being disruptive, but whom the teacher identifies as a student with likeable qualities who can be ‘saved’. Some teachers are glad when there are silent and invisible students in the room, because such students make very few demands on their time, meaning that there are fewer students for them to worry about ([Pye, 1988](#)).

Some describe quiet students as being frightened in school and attempting to protect themselves by avoiding any action that will bring attention from the teacher or from other students (c.f. [Holt, 1995](#)). Like Ninny, they have been frightened into invisibility by those around them:

‘You all know, don’t you, that if people are frightened very often, they sometimes become invisible’, Too-ticky said and swallowed a small egg mushroom that looked like a snowball.

In school there are several occasions that many students find frightening, but these are also times that are crucial in terms of being noticed or not. One such occasion is an oral presentation or performance. If the oral presentation is greeted with silence, the silence may be perceived by the students concerned as unpleasant and uncomfortable in the extreme. They question their performance: ‘Did I say something wrong?’ ‘Have I made a fool of myself?’ ([Alerby, 2020, p. 81](#)). The silence of the teacher and of the other students, which is in itself a response, creates an atmosphere in which the student responsible for the incorrect answer is made to feel isolated, separate from the rest of the class. Rather than being part of the group, he or she is shunned. But perhaps the silence occurred because what was just said has given rise to contemplation and reflection (c.f. [Olearczyk, 2022, in print](#)). Those who listened may need time and space in stillness to allow the message to sink in. If that is the case, then the silence might instead be perceived as both pleasing and comfortable.

Even if no words are spoken in both of these situations, small silent nuances of body language amongst the audience determine how the silence is perceived by those who have just spoken: a quiet look that conveys either contempt or admiration, an indifferent shrug, or a quiet, affirmative nodding, a person’s position on their chair, or perhaps the position of the arms (c.f. [Bosacki, 2022, in print](#); [Hamera, 2005](#)).

### To be, or not to be, quiet—Silence Among Students

Should the students in the classroom be quiet or should they not? Which situations require quietness from the students, and which situations expect the students to raise their voices? That are issues of significance to reflect upon. Often paradoxical situations arise where, at one moment, a teacher is trying to get the students to quieten down, whilst in the next moment, students are expected to make their voices heard (Alerby, 2020). The shift is from social interaction to first attentive silence and then to task focused discussion. An aspect to consider in connection to silence in school, is therefore what happens if a student does not actively share in a discussion but is quiet, even though the point of discussion is such that they should have something to say about it? The question of who is actually silent also needs to be raised.

There is, according to Merleau-Ponty (1996), an important difference between being unable to speak or make one's voice heard and being silent. People are silent only when they are able to talk—that is, when they have something to say. How does this relate to what is happening in the schools of today? Many students are described by others and often by themselves as quiet, shy or lacking in confidence. This does not mean that they have nothing to say. Perhaps they have not been given the silent moment necessary to take part in a discussion. Perhaps they lack the confidence to seize the available second of silence and speak. They may have much of value to add to the on-going discussion, but their thoughts and opinions are not made available to others. Often such students know the answer to a question the teacher has just asked, but they do not offer to share this knowledge. But are they truly silent? Using the reasoning above that a person is silent only when they have something to say, it follows that, if students who do not make their voices heard are to be considered silent, they must have something to say. According to Alerby (2020), most students have an opinion to add to the discussion or an answer to the question. The active participants in class, those who feel that what they have to say is important and will be valued, have little hesitation in sharing their opinions with others. In contrast, for some reason, others choose not to do so, positioning themselves as the quiet members of the class, from whom little is expected in terms of spoken participation, a role that can become self-fulfilling. That is, the teacher and fellow classmates expect that these students will not speak and the students themselves come to expect the same. When Ninny first came to the Moomin family she was totally quiet. She did not speak at all. After Too-ticky explained the situation to the family:

There was a slight pause. Only the rain was heard, rustling along over the veranda roof. Everybody stared at Too-ticky and thought for a while.

'Does she talk?' Moominpappa asked.

'No. But the lady has hung a small silver bell around her neck so that one can hear where she is.'

Note the contrast between the positive thinking silence of the Moomin family as they ponder the situation presented by Too-ticky and the negative externally imposed silence of Ninny.

Students who are forced into a similar uncomfortable and perhaps frightening silence may long to move to a state where they are ignored by the teacher and by their peers. In essence invisibility is preferable to ongoing humiliation. Ninny has been so frightened by the negative reaction of her caregiver that she feels unable to express any emotion. She doesn't know how to play. She seems not to understand jokes and never shows any signs of anger. Her inability to participate appropriately means that the Moomin children give up trying to include her in their activities.

'She can't play', mumbled Moomintroll.

'She can't get angry', little My said. 'That's what's wrong with her.'

...

At last they stopped trying to teach Ninny to play. She didn't like funny stories either. She never laughed in the right places. She never laughed at all, in fact. This had a depressing effect on the person who told the story. And she was left alone to herself.

### Please don't see me—Hiding in Plain Sight

When it come to the invisible students themselves, they are often very careful where they sit in class. According to Pye (1988) they tend to sit at the edges of the room where they are less likely to be noticed, and they do just enough work to get by. Failing to complete work would draw attention as would work that was excellent or substantially below that which was expected. Their concern is that they should do nothing to stand out, attracting neither praise nor censure. Pye (1988) believes that the majority of such students are underachievers. Given the amount of class time devoted to oral activities and the central part that talk, both teacher talk and student talk, plays in the majority of classrooms, it is hard to imagine that these students are really learning as much as they could with more communication with teachers and other students. Merleau-Ponty (1995) emphasized, however, that humans cannot express everything verbally, arguing that there is a silent and implicit language that exists within. That is, since not everything can be communicated verbally, some things are unspeakable and exist in a place beyond that which be spoken of. Some of the so called invisible and quiet students do well in particular subjects or activities, but their achievements in these isolated areas are rarely identified for discussion with their other teachers.

Pye (1988) suggests a number of reasons why students choose to present invisible versions of themselves. Perhaps they are burdened by parents who are overly ambitious. They may find school boring, a feeling shared by many potentially high achieving students. Others may have developed a low self-opinion of their learning ability due to, for example, bullying and years of neglect by teachers. Maybe these students, like Ninny, become invisible. It may also be that the visibility vs invisibility varies, depending on the treatment at the specific moment.

‘Hello Ninny,’ shouted My. ... When are you going to show your snout? You must look a fright if you’ve wanted to be invisible.’

‘Shout up,’ Moomintroll whispered, ‘she’ll be hurt.’

He went running up to Ninny and said:

‘Never mind My. She’s hard-boiled. You’re really safe here among us. Don’t even think about that horrid lady. She can’t come here and take you away ...’

In a moment Ninny’s paws had faded away and become nearly indistinguishable from the grass.

But when the Moominmamma and the rest of the Moomin family treat Ninny with kindness and compassion, she gradually became visible again.

Ninny’s paws appeared back again, and above them a pair of spindly legs came to view. Above the legs one could see the faint outline of a brown dress hem.

### Understanding and Responding to Student Silence and Invisibility

The way student silence and invisibility are understood varies from school to school. The attitudes to silence often depend on the prevailing culture of the school. Are teachers willing to accept when a student is quiet? Or is the student who chooses to be silent seen as a trouble-maker? Quiet students are sometimes viewed by the school, teachers, and principals, as a problem. A student’s silence can even be described as pathological (von Wright, 2012). When Ninny, the silent and invisible child in the fairytale, was brought to the Moomin family, the Moominpappa was very concerned, regarding her silence and invisibility as an illness which needs medical treatment.

‘How on earth does one make her visible again?’ Moominpappa said worriedly. ‘Should we take her to a doctor?’

This reaction was something that the Moominmamma disagreed with.



‘I don’t think so’, said Moominmamma.

Rather than regarding student silence as pathological, their silence may be the result of the asymmetrical relationship between teacher and student. ‘A vital component of an educational relation is asymmetry; the asymmetry between a teacher who has the authority and young students who are on their way to entering public life’ (von Wright, 2012, p. 93). In this type of educational relationship, there are always facets of silence that are comprised of both expectations and uncertainty.

The ways in which student silence are interpreted vary. If a student does not respond when the teacher believes that they have something to say, their silence can be seen as passive resistance to the learning process. Silence can be taken to indicate lack of knowledge or lack of intelligence. Another teacher may, however, decide that the student is shy (Lund, Ertesvåg & Roland, 2010). What is rarely considered is that their silence is due to thoughtfulness and that, when they respond, their response will be the result of thoughtful reflection and consideration. The question is whether this silent thinking time is permitted, and this is very much dependent on the prevailing school culture. This can be manifested at a whole school level, at the individual class level or among student groups (Lees, 2012). A highly competitive culture which focuses on individual achievement may result in students being silent out of fear of answering incorrectly or expressing an opinion which is not held by the majority. If an incorrect answer or a slightly unusual opinion is mocked, by either the teacher or by fellow students, the student concerned may choose to remain silent as a means of self-protection. The opposite can also occur if silence is a natural and appreciated part of everyday life at school. The difference in the personal impact of silence is whether the silence is chosen as a valued state, imposed by others or withdrawn into as a means of self-protection. Silence can, for example, be used to shut oneself off from the outside world—a way of protecting oneself, someone else or something that the person knows about but does not want to discuss (Alerby, 2020). In the fairytale, Ninny had faded away and become silent and invisible as a way to protect herself from the treatment by the lady taking care of her. That this reaction is not confined to fairytales is manifest in students in schools today who fade and become invisible due to treatment by teachers and peers.

Merleau-Ponty stressed that the invisible is something other than merely the non-visible. It is instead an absence that matters in the world, as the underlying condition for the visible (Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968). But what do we mean when we say a student is invisible? Invisible students are sometimes described as those students that teachers do not notice (Pye, 1988). This can mean that the teacher does not even associate the name on the roll with the student belonging to that name. The silver bell on Ninny’s neck shows where she is and is also an indication that she actually exists, in the same way that the class roll is an indicator of the student’s existence.

If we use discernment to allow silence, we are preparing the way for those who are not so talkative. We need to be aware that a reticent person is not automatically silent in thought or mind (Alerby & Elífdóttir, 2003). In schools, we should try instead to draw out the silent knowledge and silent languages that, according to Merleau-Ponty (2002), can be found in everyone. Doing so will add to the richness of learning, both for the silent, invisible student and for all around them.

Teachers and students should therefore strive for a climate in which it is permissible to reflect and experiment with responses, to be able to give an answer that is perhaps not what was anticipated when the question was asked. Perhaps this unexpected answer will be the one that leads thoughts to new dimensions. If the only acceptable answers are those already known to the teacher and to at least some of the other students, the possibilities for new ideas and new learning are diminished. Given this it is important to encourage openness and responsiveness towards others and what is said (Kostenius, 2008).

### **Listening to the Silence and Making the Invisible Visible—Some Final Words**

When consider the significance of silence and invisibility in various educational settings, one needs to focus on the ways in which the spoken word is valued in the school world. By talking—using oral words—a range of school valued concepts and phenomena are brought into being and made available for discussion and consideration. The spoken word is immensely important in order

for us to be able to both create our world and to gain knowledge, insight and understanding of it. It is crucial for life itself and a foundation of much that happens in schools and in the wider community. According to Merleau-Ponty, '[l]anguage realizes by breaking the silence, what the silence wished and did not obtain. Silence continues to envelop language; the silence of the absolute language, of the thinking language' (Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968, p. 176). The challenge for the teacher is to be alert to silence in the midst of the noise that is so much a part of school life. A teacher's task is to listen to both what is said and what is not said, and to notice all students, those who are visible in every sense of the word as well as those who are more or less invisible.

A problem that can arise is that, even when students in a school class say something and express an opinion, their voices are not always heard. Of course, this does not apply only to students. There are other groups and individuals who are not heard, whose voices are silent or silenced. Think back to the pronouncement of St Paul referred to earlier. It should not surprise us that many students say that they do not feel part of the class because their voices are ignored or under-appreciated. Perhaps this is because their contribution differs from that expected and valued by the school community. Perhaps they lack the confidence and verbal skills to make themselves heard above the noise of others. If there is no space for these students to be heard, the response is often for them to become more and more quiet. As they withdraw, like Ninny, they turn 'pale and fade around the edges' so less and less can be seen of them, until they too become invisible.

When it comes to silence and invisibility in school, it is important to observe how the silence and invisibility is perceived. Is silence regarded negatively as destructive to learning or positively as an integral part of learning? In some contexts, silence is needed in order for reflection and learning to occur. In other situations, when it is associated with bullying and fear, it can be devastating. And, as Arendt (1958) reminds us, it is not only those who are silenced that are of concern. It is the silence of the good people that is dangerous.

We spoke earlier of the silence of invisible student being accepted or ignored. When teachers accept silence by saying the student is just very quiet or shy, they use this as an explanation of their failure to actively engage the student in learning. At least the 'shy, quiet' student is recognised. The silent student that is ignored ceases to exist in any meaningful way, the only sign of their presence a name on the class roll. Pye (1988) challenges both these reactions to the silent and invisible student, arguing that invisible students could be made to engage and blossom if all staff pay attention to them and insist that they take an active part in lessons. Some students will never volunteer to answer questions or to read aloud in class but, if they are asked directly and given the appropriate support, they do not usually refuse. That Ninny is reassured by the welcome by the Moomin family, and especially by the Moominmamma, is evidenced on the morning when she has begun to be visible.

The bell came tinkling downstairs, one step at a time, with a small pause between each step. ... But the silver bell wasn't the exciting thing. That was the paws. Ninny's paws were coming down the steps. They were very small with anxiously bunched toes. Nothing else of Ninny was visible. It was very odd.

For staff to collaborate to help students in this way would require the presence of invisible students to be acknowledged and the responsibility of the school to meet their needs to be recognised. It would also need the place and purpose of silence to be considered. If this were to be done, Pye (1988) thinks that in time teachers would be able to engage invisible students more and their academic work would improve. There would, after all, be no point in them trying to remain invisible, if they were being noticed anyway.

The importance of disturbing the silence, of having a voice and being heard is made clear in the Helen Reddy song that became the anthem of the women's liberation movement—'I am woman. Hear me roar'. The difference between the 'roar' of this song and the silence commanded by Paul is marked. There is a distinct similarity in the roar of liberated woman and the roar of rage from the now visible Ninny in the final stage of the story.

Ninny was standing on the landing stage. She had a small, snub-nosed angry face below a red tangle of hair. She was hissing at Moominpappa like a cat.

'Don't you **dare** push her into the big horrible sea!' she cried.

This is a very different child from the silent and invisible Ninny at the beginning of the story who is 'a very orderly little child'. It is only when Ninny feels able to express all her feelings, including anger, that she becomes fully visible. When Moominpappa falls into the water after she bites his tail, Ninny is overcome with laughter.

The landing stage shook with her laughter.

'I believe she's never laughed before,' Too-ticky said wonderingly. 'You seem to have changed her: she's even worse than little My. But the main thing is that one can see her, of course'.

## To Conclude

It is worth stopping to think about how the Moomintroll family reacted to Ninny and how this relates to the treatment of silent and invisible students in schools. The family accepted Ninny's right to silence but they did this while encouraging her participation in all their activities. Moominmamma gave her special attention and the Moomin children tried to include her in their games. Ninny formed a close relationship with Moominmamma and, because of this, found her voice, first in anger and then in laughter. If teachers were able to follow the example offered by the Moomin family, especially that of Moominmamma, perhaps the silent and invisible children in our classrooms would also be able to find their voice and become visible and active participants in their education. We therefore emphasize the importance of listening to the silence and seeing the invisible—a prerequisite for making the invisible visible.

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