The role of silent witness in self-transcendence through art and mindfulness-based processes in learning environments
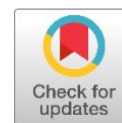
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ABSTRACT

Engaging in silent witness within structured art and mindfulness practices allows for various benefits. Silent witness involves the absence of verbal response-withholding commentary, including communications of judgement, criticism, or (mis)interpretation. Thus, it enables a liberating learning space for spontaneous self-inquiry and measured risk-taking. This conceptual article explores a structured model of art therapy that supports silence, creativity, and spontaneous expression (Allen, 1995), and we connect this to relevant mindfulness mechanisms. The use of silence in this model promotes insight, self-awareness, and space for new experiences and possibilities while promoting enjoyment, exploration, and self-regulation. Silent witness becomes the driving force for practitioners to arrive at new "inner destinations," directing attention inward, facilitating internal processes that lead to reframing previous thoughts, emotions, and experiences, leading to authentic self-knowledge and the ability to be fully oneself. This convergence of silence, mindfulness, and art foster deeper personal growth and connection, which we propose as a new form of social-emotional learning in education settings.

1. Introduction: Contextualising the Open Studio Process (OSP) in Art Therapy

Silence in art therapy can be more than the absence of words; it can be a powerful tool for fostering deep self-expression and emotional healing. Yet, the role of silence here has been largely overlooked, with empirical attention mostly focused on the absence of verbal exchanges in psychotherapy (Regev et al., 2016). The Open Studio Process (OSP) model of art therapy, which emphasises silent non-judgmental witness combined with inquiry, is an approach that powerfully uses silence as a change mechanism. In this article, we suggest this model has untapped potential for educational environments, where it could be utilised as an inquiry-based form of social-emotional learning (SEL) supporting greater understanding and connection to oneself and the classroom community. As a method, it may help students develop skills underlying core SEL competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, awareness of the feelings and needs of others and positive relational skills (Collaborative for Academic and Emotional Learning, 2024).

Silence emerges in the OSP via a "no-comment rule," whereby the facilitator and participants do not offer verbal responses to their own artwork or that of others within the group. Rather than eliminating all verbal exchanges, this rule serves as a form of 'functional silence' (Valle, 2019). Fostering a deeper connection to the creative process and oneself, the absence of commentary creates

a sense of psychological safety (i.e., reduced interpersonal risk and a feeling of safety in being oneself) (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). This comes from withholding verbal critique, interpretation, judgement, or commentary about any of the artwork created. Absence of commentary can encourage deeper layers of silence within individuals and the group, providing a gateway to internal quietude, fostering emotional harmony, mental clarity, insight, and a greater connection to oneself and the surrounding world (Valle, 2019). After participants engage in this self-reflective process, they are invited to silently witness each other's creative journeys by sharing their writing and artwork/images with the group. The OSP model's intrinsic foundation in mindful awareness connects these layers of silence across environmental, individual, and group processes.

As we further describe this model and its associated mechanisms, we also explore the unique features that make it an effective SEL intervention for use in educational settings. We propose that the model (developed by Allen, 1995) has elements similar to relational mindfulness practices (Gruber & Henriksen, 2024). This includes inquiry supported by the phenomenon of 'silent witness,' a term we propose to capture the dynamics of non-verbal, present centred listening that creates an opening and invites one to express themselves in the presence of another without receiving a verbal response. Having the attention of another person, without their verbal response often allows participants to express themselves in an honest, unfiltered way.

Table 1. Key Terms/Concepts and Definitions

Term	Definition
Social Emotional Learning (SEL)	A developmental learning process that enables participants to learn self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills, and responsible decision-making abilities (CASEL, 2024).
Open Studio (OS)	Group-based artmaking where participants are invited to explore a variety of art media available and create at their own pace.
Open Studio Process (OSP)	A variation of the OSP that follows a structure: 1) put an intention in writing, set it aside 2) use art materials for a set amount of time 3) free write in response to engaging in the art-making process. Both participants and the facilitator engage in the process alongside one another. After the process is complete, participants are invited, not required, to share their art and writing. (Allen,1995)
"No-comment" (OSP)	The only rule in the OSP, both participants and the facilitator are not allowed to comment on their own or each other's artwork at all in any stage of the process. (Allen,1995)
Relational mindfulness (RM)	Directing present centered non-judgemental awareness towards oneself and another, while speaking or listening. This can involve structured practices wherein one partner is the speaker and the other is the listener. The listener follows the "no comment" rule with no verbal response to the speaker and is a silent witness for their partner. (Gruber & Henriksen, 2024).
Silent witness	A form of non-verbal, present centred, deep listening that serves as an invitation and "holds the space" for another to authentically express their internal experience (e.g., through speaking, sharing writing, or art) in the presence of another without worry or concern about what the response will be due to the "no comment" rule.
Transcendence	The development of a positive relationship between self and other that transcends self-focused needs and increases prosocial characteristics (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012).

To contextualise the OSP model within art therapy, we introduce art therapy's origins and evolution, particularly within the dominant medical model of mental health, which emphasises verbal interaction and with it, pathology. We overview the OSP approach, which Patricia Allen (1995) developed using silence as a strategic departure from historically pathology-focused art therapy approaches, aiming to empower participants to take healing into their own hands through creative expression. In exploring the potential mechanisms of the OSP and its implicit connections to

contemplative practice, we propose a parallel process in mindful awareness and relational mindfulness practices. This connection is rooted in the OSP's intentional avoidance of commentary, both in relation to the self and others, as commentary often takes on negative or pathology-based interpretations. We argue that the model, which departs from therapist- or expert-led interventions, employs a structure that empowers participants to guide their own experiences, creating potentially significant opportunities for growth. Ultimately, having a witness or group of witnesses see and hear the outcome of the OSP, while withholding commentary, can have a similar impact to feeling seen and accepted. Finally, we discuss its implications for educational practices, where the same process can nurture self-awareness and regulation, in addition to shifting the experience of oneself into more positive feelings about oneself and in connection to others (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). To prefigure our discussion, we offer Table 1, summarising keywords and concepts used throughout the article to guide readers.

2. Foundations of Art Therapy

To understand the potential benefits of the OSP, some background on art therapy is required. The field harnesses the creative process to help individuals express inner experiences, conflicts, and desires nonverbally through varied media (e.g., paint, collage, clay, etc.). Traditionally rooted in psychological theory, art therapy is implemented by professional (master's level or higher) therapists in diverse settings like hospitals, wellness centres, schools, and outpatient, private practice (American Art Therapy Association, 2022). This non-verbal component is useful for those who have experienced trauma, are undergoing changes to life circumstances or crisis, processing grief and loss, or for individuals on the Autism Spectrum, with dementia, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (American Art Therapy Association, 2022).

There are many advantages to working non-verbally, within the realm of images and creativity, to heal and ameliorate symptoms of human suffering. This approach emphasises spontaneous, unplanned creative expression as a way of bypassing verbal defence mechanisms and accessing internal, subconscious experience (Wadeson, 2010). Subconscious experience can be accessed and expressed through the rich territory of images, meaning and metaphors to externalise and represent psychological phenomena. The artmaking process is both physical and creative and can move energy for self-expression and psychological healing.

The OSP builds upon a foundational concept from the art world, the Open Studio (OS), which laid the foundations for the creation of art therapy. Introduced in psychiatric hospitals in the 1940s by artists influenced by humanistic psychology (Finkel & Bat Or, 2020), the OS is a physical space set up for artmaking within a group. With oversight from a facilitator, participants can choose their materials and work at their own pace alongside one another, guided by their own curiosity.

The OS paved the way for art therapy as a profession, which was formed in the 1960's. As it was formalised, it was heavily influenced by psychodynamic and psychoanalytic theories, particularly the work of Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud, who emphasised the imagery and symbolism of the unconscious (Wadeson, 2010). This clinical focus led to a tension within the field, as some practitioners argued for prioritising therapeutic processes, which tend to focus on pathology, while others advocated for prioritizing creative processes, given the potential for creativity to support healing in itself. This de-emphasizes the analysis or pathology of the client through the minimization of verbal exchange. The OSP, which views artmaking as an inherently healing and empowering process, is a return to art therapy's origins, relying more on communication through imagery than words.

1.1. A Return to Art as Therapy

Patricia Allen (1992) coined the term "clinification syndrome" to describe the overemphasis on the psychotherapeutic process at the expense of the creative process in art therapy. She argued that in seeking legitimization, art therapy had overly conformed to the biopsychosocial medical model of mental health, which conceptualises mental health through clinical diagnoses, and their biological, social, and psychological underpinnings (Huda, 2021). Over reliance on this model, Allen argued, sidelines the creative process, reducing art to a tool for diagnosis and treatment rather than a pathway to healing in its own right and prioritizes traditional talk therapy methods. Thus, by focusing on the creative process there is a shift from internal and external dialogue that so often accompanies therapy to the representational power of the art itself so that silence and contemplation become possible.

The Open Studio Process (OSP), which Allen created in 1995, alongside two of her graduate students, reflects an allegiance to "the creative process (it) is durable and will not betray you. That's where my loyalty lies" (Henriksen & Gruber, 2021, p. 3). The OSP builds on the original Open Studio (OS) model, aligning with the art-as-therapy approach, where the creative process is central to therapeutic work and inherently incorporates healing qualities (Kramer, 2000), not requiring a therapist's interpretative analysis, paving the way for contemplative connection to one's internal processes more deeply. This contrasts with approaches where art is merely a foundation for interpretative processes based on psychological theories (Finkel & Bat Or, 2020).

In recent years, there has been an influx of research on variations of the OS, including the OSP, which reflects its growing use and adaptation to meet contemporary needs for community-based, group healing processes. OS has been adapted creatively to meet the needs of diverse populations. It has maintained characteristics including centering artmaking in the healing process, organising the physical environment as an 'enabling space' for exploration, and emphasising individual expression within a communal space. The facilitator's role in these settings is to enable and encourage the creative process rather than to interpret or direct it (Finkel & Bat Or, 2020). These characteristics are also essential to the OSP, which has unique features that make it particularly suited for educational contexts. Before considering the psychological mechanisms of silence in the OSP and possible implications and applications for education, we describe the model itself, situating its processes and uses of silence, then we review the literature on the impact of engaging in OS approaches, highlighting their benefits for participants and facilitators alike.

1.2. "Alone Together": The Open Studio Process, a Variant of Open Studio

The OSP builds on the foundations of the OS, and the model creates a safe space that supports participants to be "alone together"—embodied within their own internal experiences while in the presence of others engaging in the same process. This "being with" in embodied presence in silence together is prior to utterance and does not need utterance. From a developmental psychology perspective, this capacity first begins between parent and child, with a child feeling safe enough to begin to explore their own internal world of thoughts, feelings, and imagination in the presence of a parent. Winnicott (1958), who identified this phenomenon, theorised it to be a marker of emotional maturity and a healthy experience. The structure aims to foster both individual introspection and collective participation, making it powerful in educational settings. A distinguishing feature is the "no-comment" rule, which prohibits commentary on the artwork for oneself or others. This rule aims to create the conditions for psychological safety, in an environment that invites participants to explore their creativity without fear of judgement or external evaluation. By minimising external verbal processes, the OSP has the potential to promote a deeper connection with the internal creative and psychological processes, encouraging participants to engage with their emotions and thoughts through inner silence. In educational contexts, it is a powerful move to design experiences that support psychological safety, where students often face pressures to conform or perform, which inherently stifles creativity (Beghetto, 2015). By removing the need for external validation, the OSP encourages authentic self-expression, self-inquiry, and emotional exploration. The absence of commentary also deemphasizes the role of the facilitator as an authoritative expert. Instead, facilitators participate alongside the group, modelling the creative process without imposing their interpretations or judgments. This approach aims to minimize power imbalances within the creative space, inviting participants to own their experiences and creating the conditions that could foster a sense of agency and empowerment.

The "no-comment" rule, as applied in OSP after school programs with at-risk youth, has been linked to significant psychological benefits. Block et al. (2005) observed that in a safe atmosphere free from judgement, participants could delve into deeper emotional territories and gain otherwise inaccessible insights. The role of silence here is not merely the absence of speech but a deliberate space for engaging in awareness of one's own internal processes, allowing participants to develop insight about their experiences on their own terms. This form of verbal silence allows for other types and levels of silence to emerge, including non-verbal knowing (Valle, 2019), along with their corresponding benefits, such as greater insight from a deeper place of knowing. These deeper levels of silence are integral to the OSP's effectiveness, and will be explored later, as we discuss the mechanisms through which silence facilitates internal change. First, we share a more detailed description of the model to orient the reader to its use in practice.

1.3. The Open Studio Process Model

Building on the OS, the OSP is physically set up in a manner that allows for independent engagement with, and exploration of art materials driven by participant curiosity. The facilitator, who is not required to be an art therapist, but someone familiar with the model, ensures the process is followed. They work alongside the participants, engaging in the OSP themselves, to model the process and deemphasize the role of an expert or authoritative facilitator. The art materials are often simple and can include, for example, oil pastels, tempura paint, found objects, tin foil, and masking tape (Block et al., 2005), for one-dimensional (e.g., drawing or painting) or three-dimensional artwork (e.g., sculpture, collage). Materials could also include supplies commonly found within classrooms, like coloured pencils or markers. The steps, outlined below, are orchestrated by the facilitator, but the work is self-directed and has "safeguards" built in (Henriksen & Gruber, 2021). The model (described below) has some built-in parameters that make it possible to experience deeper levels of silence (Allen, 1995).

1) Setting an intention in writing

Participants begin by setting an intention for the session in writing. This could be a statement or question exploring anything the participant chooses to affirm or explore. For example: "I make the JV team" or "Why was I so bothered by my sister earlier?" Once the intention is written, it is set aside.

2) Making art

Next, the participant selects art materials and makes art for a set period of time, moderated by the facilitator. The goal is to use the art materials in a way that is pleasant, soothing, and enjoyable, guided by feeling, not thinking, planning, or trying to constrict or constrain the artwork in any way. Participants are encouraged to engage in spontaneous, free expression—making what they wish to, to move and make creative energy visible. They are encouraged to notice their experience in body and mind. Participants are also encouraged to use the entire duration of the artmaking time. If a participant gets stuck, they can ask the facilitator for help but first they must "ask the image." This encourages participants to stay with their experience.

3) Written response to the art

When the facilitator signals that time is up, participants engage with their artwork through written response and dialogue with it. This could include writing a description of the image, the participant describing their thoughts and emotions in response to it or exchanging in written "dialogue" with the image. Participants return to their initial intention and "ask the image" for an answer or guidance through freewriting.

4) Sharing

When the process is complete, the silence component ends, as participants are invited to verbally take turns sharing their writing and their artwork before the group. The "no-comment" rule in response to other's sharing is still upheld, and sharing one's own work or process is never required. The extent to which participants share is also up to them. They can decide to share only portions of their work or nothing at all. The purpose is for participants to have the opportunity to share their work with each other and bear witness to one another's processes, without needing to worry about how it will be received.

The totality of this process, exploring an intention through writing and art, can be viewed as a powerful form of inquiry-based learning about oneself. In sharing OSP work as a group and witnessing one another's experiences, participants can move beyond focusing on themselves and expand their perspectives, practising deep listening, and developing empathy.

3. Therapeutic and Educational Benefits of Open Studio Models

A systematic meta-review of OS research conducted by Finkel and Batt Or (2020) highlights the benefits of participation in Open Studio (OS) models, noting improvements in quality of life for participants, including reduction of stress and negative affect and increased positive affect and self-efficacy. The resurgence of OS approaches within the literature may reflect a broader movement within community mental health approaches, toward increased adaptation of "salutogenic or healing and resilience models" that encourage creativity and contribute to a greater sense of social belonging and well-being (Finkel & Batt Or, 2020). These approaches align with the healing properties of the creative process, where the participant-artist is viewed as a creative agent capable of their own healing.

Empirical studies also support the efficacy of OS models. For example, Kaimal et al. (2017) found that OS interventions outperformed traditional art therapist-led colouring sessions in increasing positive affect, creative agency, and self-efficacy among adults. The self-directed nature of creating art spontaneously in an environment that promotes curiosity allows participants to experience deeper benefits using the OS process. Similarly, Kaimal and Ray (2016) demonstrated that participation in OS significantly reduced negative affect and enhanced self-efficacy in healthy adults. These findings suggest that OS models not only foster emotional well-being but also empower participants by enhancing their agency and creative potential.

The Open Studio Process (OSP) builds on OS through its highly structured protocol, including the additional component of silence directed by the "no-comment" rule. OS has been applied in diverse contexts, from supporting individuals experiencing homelessness, to aiding veterans with trauma, and for students in educational settings. The versatility of the OSP, which does not require facilitation by a licensed art therapist, makes it accessible and adaptable to diverse populations and environments (Open Studio Project, n.d.).

Finkel and Batt Or (2020) highlight the growing focus on the therapeutic benefits of OS practices. Chiu et al. (2015) found that open studio participation significantly reduced negative moods in acute psychiatric patients. Similarly, Griffith et al. (2015) observed positive life outcomes, like employment and housing, among homeless individuals involved in community-based open studios. The model's emphasis on healthy self-expression aligns with modern mental health models such as recovery theory (Anthony, 1993) and well-being theory (Seligman, 2011), which prioritise health over traditional medical models. Allen (1992) argues that focusing on art in therapy helps anchor art therapists' work and counters the "clinification" trend in mental health care.

In educational contexts, the OSP has shown particular promise. A qualitative study by Kim (2024) revealed that facilitators found the OSP was a highly adaptable intervention with therapeutic benefits in schools, enhancing participants' creativity, healing, autonomy, and self-esteem. Another study involving 288 students across middle and high schools demonstrated that participants who engaged in OSP reported fewer somatic symptoms of stress and anxiety and higher levels of subjective well-being. Teachers also observed improvements in student-teacher relationships, their own well-being, and greater classroom diversity awareness among students (Kim, 2020).

These findings suggest that the OSP offers a valuable tool for educational settings, where its principles of creative expression, emotional regulation (e.g., feeling emotion without being stuck in it or overloaded by it), self-awareness (e.g., recognition of one's own feelings, thoughts, beliefs, or behaviors), guided by self-inquiry that includes the intentional use of silence can contribute to a more supportive and effective learning environment. That said, most extant research on all OS models overall exists within community-based settings (e.g., art centres, churches, shelters, rehabilitation centres, etc.) or clinical settings (hospitals, clinics, etc.). Only about 6% of research on OS models reflect their use in educational settings (Finkel & Batt Or, 2020), a number which may inherently be smaller when directly considering applications of the OSP.

This limited application/research on the model may potentially reflect the priorities of many public education settings (particularly in primary or secondary contexts)—which are often driven by standards, metrics and subject matter knowledge rather than students' wellbeing, creativity or self-inquiry (Henriksen et al., 2019). Given that the model is primarily offered within community contexts and designed to be facilitated by laypeople, it is always possible that the "no comment" rule is not upheld by the participants, which has the potential to disrupt and undermine the process. Participants may also struggle to connect with setting an intention or focusing on a question and therefore have trouble connecting with the process of self-guided inquiry altogether. Despite these limitations, given substantive concerns around students' mental health, a growing interest in SEL, and the need for creative development among students today, models like the OSP have significant potential. This signals an opportunity to understand how it can be integrated into existing curricula to maximise its benefits. The mechanisms of the model are grounded in the functional silence of the "no-comment" rule, which we unpack in more detail and explore in connection to relational mindfulness, upheld by the role of a silent witness.

4. Silence Naturally Drives Mechanisms of Internal Change

Valle (2019) conducted a multidisciplinary literature review on the role of silence in a variety of contexts, identifying 10 forms of silence that build upon each other and encourage progressively deeper levels of stillness. Silence begins externally, moves inward, gradually accessing deeper layers of consciousness, potentially leading to self-transcendence. The first five layers include: environmental, sensory-based responses to external stimuli, mental responses to external stimuli, emotional, and verbal silence. The "no-comment" rule in the OSP model imposes an environmental form of silence, which can become a vehicle for accessing deeper layers of silence. By withholding verbal commentary, artmaking/inquiry-based writing allows the participants to be with their own experiences more intimately, allowing for the potential of delving deeper into unconscious material. Of course, each participant's experience of engagement in OSP is unique and not all participants experience all levels of silence at once or within each OSP session. It is, however, possible for other layers of silence to emerge through this process, including slowing of thinking, fundamental awareness, non-verbal knowing, direct observation, and self-transcendence (Valle, 2019). Similar to Vago & Silbersweig (2012), Valle (2019, p. 239) frames self-transcendence as an outcome resulting from moving through "self-knowledge, self-regulation, and self-mastery" so that a "new experience of self in which separate egoic and existential identifications dissolve" (Vaughn, 1985, p. 45 as cited by Valle, 2019), which means "realizing our spiritual essence," a part connected to the greater whole. Both definitions point to self-transcendence being an outcome as a result of engaging in stillness or inner silence that leads to self-regulation (e.g., feeling emotion without being stuck in it or lost in it) and self-awareness (e.g., recognition of one's own feelings, thoughts, beliefs, or behaviors), with self-transcendence being a new sense of self that is more positive and more deeply connected to one's inner self and the surrounding, outside world. Mindfulness research as a whole points to these three major mechanisms of inter- and intrapersonal change, including enhancement of self-regulation, self-awareness, and self-transcendence (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012), mirroring the layers of silence detailed above.

For group practices like mindfulness or OSP to be successful in bringing about deeper layers of silence, the environment in which they are practised, must be experienced as safe. The "no-comment" rule in the OSP can lower anticipatory defence strategies and yet, silence itself can also potentially trigger hypervigilance or anxiety. To promote nervous system regulation, other environmental cues for physiological safety can be put in place, such as playing soothing, melodic music to counteract any potential discomfort with auditory silence (Porges, 2017). Both mindfulness practices and working with art materials can also have a soothing effect, activating the parasympathetic nervous system, to help participants with emotion regulation (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, Henriksen & Gruber, 2021).

The self-inquiry component of the model (i.e., exploring a question about oneself or one's experience), along with having the opportunity to share artwork and writing created through the OSP with the group are essential opportunities for experiencing oneself as an individual and part of the group. Having the opportunity to witness each other's experiences provides opportunities for further self-reflection and understanding as participants may consider ways their experience is similar to and different from others. In recognizing similarities, they may begin to understand that their problems are not as unique as they had once thought. This experience of "shared humanity" is one way in which individuals may come to see themselves and their experiences differently by listening to another person share theirs. In this way, silently listening with full attention, without commenting on what is being shared– to another's internal process– is relational mindfulness (Gruber & Henriksen, 2024).

The individual and collective meaning-making that happens through the OSP is connected to what Immordino-Yang (2024) calls for a shift towards understanding that educational processes are shaped by the power of the relationships that exist within them:

> We are not individuals just independently moving through space and time, learning and bumping into one another, we are actually co-creating each other's social fabric—it's really like a cloth…that powerfully speaks to the deep communal orientation of an effective learning environment. When we think about human beings' development in that dynamic, situated way, it helps us understand, in a new way, what education is for, what it's meant to enable (para. 4).

In this way, learning is amplified through these processes, in coming together to silently explore one's own individual experiences and bear witness to the varied, unique experiences of others,

allowing for greater communal connectivity and deeper appreciation and understanding of both the uniqueness and the united nature of oneself and others.

The OSP, which aims to enhance participants' self-awareness and insight, offers a creative, inquiry-based approach that includes artmaking, writing, and/or speaking and listening. This process is supported by silent witness, which fosters deeper engagement and understanding, within oneself and in connection to others. Structured models like OSP that can easily be brought into classrooms can create spaces and opportunities for personal growth and community building. Learning how to be a silent witness for another—listening with present-centered awareness, holding space without commentary or verbal labeling—can create powerful connections both within oneself and in connection to others. This form of connection avoids the constraints of language, allowing people to experience being with their own experiences and bearing witness to the experiences of others in a new way.

The OSP thus provides opportunities for experiencing transcendence, beyond focusing on oneself and experiencing oneself in new and more positive ways, internally and in connection with others. In educational settings research points to the importance of engaging in self-transcendent thinking among youth, due to its ability to support long-term healthy regulation and coordination of key brain systems associated with positive self-regard and relationship satisfaction (Gotlieb et al., 2024), two essentials to well-being. We explore and propose some possible implications or applications for education, in the final sections as follows.

5. Implications and Applications for Education for Well-Being and Self-Inquiry

Education often prioritises academic achievement and traditional knowledge, sometimes overlooking student well-being, self-awareness, and social-emotional needs (Henriksen & Shack, 2020). However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) (Mahoney et al., 2021), driven by rising concerns about youth mental health (Liang et al., 2020) and the social-emotional setbacks students faced during and since the pandemic (Zolopa et al., 2022). This interest in SEL may reflect a broader educational awareness of students' emotional well-being, self-awareness, and interpersonal skills for life success. Such programming often focuses on developing skills like empathy, collaboration, communication, etc. (Gueldner et al., 2020). These invaluable skills can be developed through experiential learning methods like the OSP. The OSP emphasises the role of silence in creative self-expression, silent witness, and non-judgmental awareness, which can support SEL efforts in schools. By creating silent spaces for introspection and mindful connection, students can experience empathy for themselves and others, expanded perspective, collective engagement in a shared purpose, and enhanced communication skills. This includes listening and speaking mindfully, and expressing oneself through creation of images and writing, rather than out-loud verbalization or linguistic articulation (which is often the focus of traditional education settings). Silence thus becomes a foundational element, enabling the self-inquiry and relational mindfulness that underpin creative learning practices.

5.1. Integrating Creativity and Self-Inquiry

The OSP model prioritises creative self-inquiry by shifting away from traditional art therapy approaches that require expert facilitation, which makes it possible to implement in classrooms (Block et al., 2005). It emphasises the individual's internal experience during the creative process. Engaging in spontaneous artmaking allows participants to connect with thoughts, emotions, and sensations in a non-verbal and intuitive manner. This facilitates a form of deeply personal and reflective self-inquiry, enabling students to explore and understand their inner landscapes without verbal articulation or expert analysis (Allen, 1995).

This approach is particularly valuable in schools, where students typically express their thoughts and emotions in structured ways that can limit their opportunities to fully explore complex internal experiences (Mahoney et al., 2021). The OSP allows learners to engage with inner worlds through art, offering a deeper understanding of themselves. This process encourages mindful awareness of one's internal states, fostering a deeper understanding of oneself—a key component of SEL. Given that schools often lack resources and teachers typically do not receive SEL training, the model's structure and lack of need for expertise is particularly useful for supporting well-being in educational settings.

The "no-comment" rule in the OSP fosters a safe space for students to express their emotions and creativity. Beghetto (2021) noted that creativity is often stifled in schools due to students' fear of criticism or judgement, leading to what he terms 'creative mortification'—the shutting down of creative development after negative feedback or critique. In the OSP a silent witness can be experienced as a supportive, accepting witness, further reinforcing positive feelings about oneself and connections to others.

Approaches that remove the fear of failure or judgement can be especially beneficial in fostering a classroom environment that supports community, creativity and emotional well-being (Henriksen & Shack, 2020). Incorporating the OSP into existing SEL programs may offer educators a structured yet flexible framework to help students engage with their emotions in a safe and supportive way. Silent witnessing can encourage self-reflection, self-compassion, and emotional regulation—skills essential for social-emotional development, personal well-being and academic success (Kwan et al., 2022).

5.2. Bridging the Gap Between SEL and Creative Education

Given the OSP model's value as a tool for self-inquiry and well-being, integrating it into educational settings may enhance SEL by combining it with creative education. While SEL programs often focus on interpersonal skills and emotional regulation, creative education emphasises use of imagination and artistic skills. The OSP naturally merges these elements by using the art-making process as a means of exploring and understanding the self. Central to this process is the structured use of silence, which creates a space for students to engage deeply with their internal experiences without the influence of external judgment or commentary.

In classrooms, the deliberate incorporation of silence through practices like the 'no-comment' rule can support the exploration of themes related to identity, personal challenges, or social issues on individual and collective levels. By setting intentions (i.e. inquiry-based), engaging in artmaking, and reflecting on the outcomes of silence, students may gain insights into their thoughts and emotions while developing creative skills (Lashley & Halverson, 2021). This silent space fosters a sense of psychological safety, where the absence of external evaluation invites more authentic self-expression and introspection. The dual focus on creativity and self-inquiry supports emotional understanding toward agency and empowerment (Graham & Lewis, 2021).

The model can also be integrated into a range of educational contexts, from classrooms to after-school programs, without extensive resources or specialised expertise. Its simplicity—requiring only basic art materials and time for its straightforward structure— supports an affordable and scalable option for schools. The structured use of silence, particularly the 'no-comment' rule, not only reduces the burden on educators but also ensures that students have a quiet, reflective space to take ownership of their creative and emotional journeys. Silence becomes both a tool and a medium, enabling a deeper connection to oneself and others within the learning environment.

5.3. Potential Challenges and Future Directions

While the OSP offers benefits, educators must be familiar with the process to facilitate it effectively, including adherence to the "no-comment rule." Establishing strong ground rules is critical, as the model is most likely to thrive in classrooms and schools where psychological safety is prioritised.

Future research may explore the model's impact on student well-being and academic outcomes. Studies may also explore best practices for integrating OSP into existing curricula. As schools look to enhance their programming related to wellbeing, creativity or SEL, specific training programs for educators or resources may be necessary for implementing the OSP in different settings. Research could also examine intersections between the OSP with other complementary well-being practices, like structured relational mindfulness practices (outlined in Gruber & Henriksen, 2024), and they can be integrated with existing approaches to well-being and emotional development.

At its core, silence and contemplation are the mechanisms underlying the OSP, which can foster authentic self-expression and deep reflection. Silence, through the 'no-comment rule,' creates a space for participants to turn inward, exploring their thoughts and emotions without fear of external judgment or critique. This quiet space encourages contemplative practices (i.e., mindful awareness) enabling participants to engage with their inner experiences more fully and develop greater self-awareness and emotional resilience. The reflective pause offered by silence allows students to process

their creative and emotional work meaningfully, transforming these practices into powerful tools for personal growth and community connection.

6. Conclusion

The OSP model offers a unique tool for well-being and self-inquiry in educational settings. By integrating creative exploration with personal self-inquiry, and grounding these practices in structured silence, the OSP may help students develop self-awareness, emotional resilience, agency, and community. Silence, as embedded in the 'no-comment rule' and the act of silent witnessing, serves as the cornerstone of this approach. It provides a contemplative space where students can reflect deeply on their inner experiences, free from judgment or external critique, fostering authentic self-expression and insight.

Through this deliberate use of silence, the OSP not only supports creative and emotional growth but also cultivates a meditative environment that encourages mindful awareness and presence. This integration of silence into creative and reflective practices aligns with the broader goals of meditative arts-based approaches, as it enables students to connect with themselves and others in profound and meaningful ways. Within an accessible and adaptable framework, the OSP can significantly impact students' lives, helping them cultivate inner awareness and resilience in their learning journeys while contributing to a deeper understanding of the transformative power of silence in education.

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