

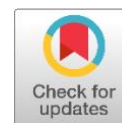
Silence, poetic inquiry and meaning making: The possibilities for literacy learning and education

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ABSTRACT

In this article we explore the relationship between silence and literacy, employing autoethnography and poetry as inquiry, highlighting how silence enhances meaning making in literacy practices. Silence is positioned not merely as an absence of sound or words but as a dynamic element integral to textual engagement and interpretation. Through an analysis of personal poetic texts, using Heidegger's concept of dwelling thinking and Barthes's idea of Work and Text, we demonstrate how silence operates on multiple levels, coexisting with words and resonating in the learner's contemplative spaces. In poetry, silence compels readers to navigate the spaces between words, fostering deeper comprehension and appreciation of the language. We argue that recognising these silences is crucial for literacy learning and has an important part as a teaching and learning approach in education. The study further discusses the pedagogical implications of teaching with silence, offering ideas for where it might be employed.



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1. Introduction

Silence is often perceived as an absence—of sound, of activity, of engagement. However, within the context of education, and particularly literacy education, silence is a potent and multifaceted tool that can profoundly influence learning processes (Caranfa, 2004; Jaworski, 1993). In this article we investigate the role of silence in education, specifically possible functions as a dynamic component in literacy practices. Our inquiry is rooted in the belief that silence is not merely a passive gap but an active and generative space that fosters deeper understanding, reflection, and creative engagement with texts.

In this study we employed a collaborative autoethnographic and poetic inquiry approach to explore the intricate relationship between silence and literacy, focusing particularly on the reading and interpretation of poetry. Through this lens, we investigate how silence coexists with and enhances textual engagement, imagination, and meaning making. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's concept of "dwelling thinking," which views language and poetry as spaces that allow for reflective thought, and Roland Barthes' distinction between "Work" and "Text," which highlights the fluid and participatory nature of textual interpretation, we contemplate how silence operates within the literary experience (Barthes, 1977; Heidegger, 1971).

The research problem guiding this inquiry centres on the underexplored potential of silence as a pedagogical tool in education. While the pedagogies often employed in education are based on verbal interaction and teacher-led dialogue, this study challenges the assumption that learning only occurs

through speaking and listening. Instead, we argue that intentional and reflective use of silence can create a more balanced and inclusive learning environment, particularly in literacy education (Bao, 2020). By integrating silence into literacy practices, educators can facilitate deeper cognitive and emotional engagement with texts, allowing students to explore meanings that extend beyond the words themselves.

Our study combines personal poetic compositions with reflective analysis, using these to investigate how silence shapes the reader's interaction with the text, influencing thought processes, and evoking emotional responses. The findings suggest that recognising and teaching the nuances of silence in literacy practices can enhance students' ability to engage with complex texts, such as poetry, and develop a more nuanced understanding of language and its array of meanings. This research thus contributes to the ongoing discourse on innovative and inclusive pedagogical practices, advocating for the strategic use of silence as a vital component of strong literacy education.

2. Literature Review

Human beings have for generations sought out "rooms of silence" to help make meaning and sense of their lives (Jaworski, 1993). Petersson et al. (2015) note that rooms of silence may be found in diverse settings, from airports and universities to shopping malls, businesses and places of healing and prayer. They argue that architects and design professionals should consider the importance of such rooms for "their capacity to afford moments of reflection" (p.131) and stillness. In a noisy and ceaselessly moving world they enhance our capacity for making sense of things. Drawing on Heidegger (1971) and Barthes (1977) our interest is in how we may 'dwell' in silence designed into educational spaces with appropriate pedagogical practices.

Dent (2003) argues that "Silence is a basic longing within all humans" (p.31). She reports an extensive list of the cognitive and affective benefits of bringing silence and stillness into classrooms for school students. Reflecting on her own teaching career she deeply regrets that she "never allowed students enough time to think, to search within themselves for their own answers to questions" (p.21). Dent's poignant reflections resonate with the evidence provided by others highlighting the pedagogical value of silence (Hao, 2010; Heywood & McCrory, 2021; Wrye, 2000; Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004).

Wrye (2000) for instance, provides testimony to the power of silence as she recounts how, in response to student requests, she turned teaching on its head to allow spaces for silence. She recounts what happened on one occasion when,

A few moments turned into ten, twenty, and then 40. No one said a thing. Several times I had wanted to start class, but the voice persisted: "Listen." While I listened in the silence, I noticed that the faces of the young people who sat in front of me were becoming transformed (p.82).

The transformations Wrye reports revealed her students' openness to listening, learning and supporting one another. Wrye's teaching had given way to students' learning. Wrye (2000) reveals that she learned to listen to her students; and to respect their needs. Generating productive silences transformed her practice; building bonds of trust and a generative culture that enhanced learning for all. She reports:

Now, when students want to have quiet time or read their journals ... I am comfortable with the silence. I have learned that students need to assimilate each other's narratives and ideas. They need the space and time to weave each other's texts into their own experience (pp. 82-83).

Wrye's experience here also reflects research reported by (Hao, 2010) highlighting the value of teacher silences. Whilst everyday common sense might suggest the importance of students listening (in silence) to their teacher's talking; conversely, Wrye was listening to her students, in mutual silence. Hao's (2010) research corroborates the importance of these teacher silences. Hao says, "it is imperative to discuss how teacher silences shape classroom communication practices ... both teacher and student silences matter" (p. 294).

Hence the silence of teachers as well as that of students is identified as crucial for learning. Caranfa (2004) argues that educational discussions too often neglect the potency of silence. Indeed, he argues that "silence is the very foundation of learning" (p.211) and significantly, for our purposes, Caranfa also highlights "the neglect of the poetic or aesthetic perspective" (p.212) in learning. He argues

silence enables “the fusion of rational and emotional aspects of our being” (p.212) a point we return to below. Exploring the Socratic tradition of learning and dialogue, Caranfa (2004) stresses “it is important to recognize that discourse, silence and self-knowledge mutually implicate one another” (p.218). Hence, according to Caranfa, silence is inherently and fundamentally part of discourse and essential for self-knowledge and learning.

Other researchers (Alerby, 2020; Hanna, 2021; Ollin, 2008) have illuminated the pedagogical significance of silence. For Alerby (2020), silence is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that may manifest in various important ways in educational settings; it is implicated deeply with power relations and the dynamics of teaching, listening and learning. Hanna (2021) investigates the relationship between silence and ‘student voice’ and points out that there is an important political dimension to silence. She argues that to properly appreciate the meaning of silence it is essential to consider also the power dynamics and disparities that surround and imbue silence; “the manifestations of power which traverse such expressions of silence” (p.1161). Recognising these silences and power dynamics including things unsaid (and unwritten) is also essential for critical literacy with texts of all sorts, including literary and poetic texts.

Ollin (2008) also argues that ‘silent pedagogy’ is a seriously neglected aspect of teaching and that it is a multi-faceted phenomenon. Ollin reminds us that Vygotsky’s (1962) work on the relationship between thought, language and learning has influenced contemporary education, supporting a focus on social interaction and the more knowledgeable other. He notes “talking with others” (Ollin 2008, 267) has become more normalised as part of the learning and meaning making process. However, Ollin points out that Vygotsky also identified the importance of, “silent inner speech, where thoughts remain private, and vocalisation is a matter of personal choice” (p.267). The importance of these “inter-spaces” (Ollin 2008: 270) for thinking and processing suggests the legitimacy of Ollin’s caution that a teacher’s voice may “have the capacity to intrude on a students’ valuable thinking time” (p.272) in ways that are not necessarily productive for students’ learning; including when they are reading or creating texts.

Researchers with an interest in language and literacy learning (Bao, 2023; Blue, 2016; Heywood & McCrory, 2021; Tatar, 2005) have also highlighted the essential nature of these inner cognitive processes. Tatar (2005) for instance, considers the strategic nature of silence for non-native-English-speaking students and reminds us of how expectations about participation and dialogue are culturally constructed. Tatar reveals different dimensions and meanings to students’ silences and recommends that “teachers should consider active listening and silent reflection as effective methods of learning” (p.292) especially for students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

Bao (2023) is also concerned with language learning, highlighting the importance of silence as an essential tool in the language-literacy teacher’s tool kit alongside visual arts, mental representation, poetry, music, and other strategies that legitimate silence as the corollary to voice. Throughout the book he resists making definitive judgement about whether silence or speech is the ultimate classroom behaviour, but rather he argues that some forms of learning are more compatible with silence than speech. Others seem more attuned to speech than silence while many can be prone to alternation between both modes (p.3).

Discussing the conceptualisation of silence in second language acquisition, Bao (2023) notes that most often, “it is speech that makes sense and deserves attention, while silence is treated with great caution and reluctance” (p.23). However, this is both short-sighted and unhelpful. Whilst “understanding silence is a challenge” (p.16) the pedagogical quest to do so is important and worthwhile. He argues:

Non-biased pedagogists, might wish to rethink the idea that silence is harmful or useless, but consider ways in which silence can be actively employed to boost the quality of thinking and talking (p.55).

Boosting the quality of thinking and talking sits well with the work of Heywood and McCrory (2021) exploring the meanings of pedagogical silence in teaching creative writing. Their book, with contributions from authors across a range of disciplines, highlights the symbiotic relationship between silence and creativity. They offer “a reconsideration of what silence, breaking silence and speaking out entails, as [their] book considers the role of silence and silent spaces in human development and thought” (p.6). Their work has resonance for teachers facilitating students’ engagements with literary

texts and poetry. In a section addressing “The Poetry of Silence” the authors consider issues of empathy, authenticity and representation; voices both heard and unheard. We are reminded again of Caranfa’s earlier observation about silence offering the capacity to bring together “the rational and emotional” aspects of human experience, a theme he has written about extensively (Caranfa, 2006, 2013).

Research confirms that students’ pedagogical engagements with poetry, both as readers and as writers, may be enhanced by respecting and providing time and space for ‘deep work’ (Newport, 2016), personal reflection, and meaning construction. As Blue (2016) observes:

There is an understanding that to absorb the impact of a poem or begin to compose our own, we need to wait for the noise of the world to recede enough to hear the whispers of our own thinking. We sometimes forget that students benefit from similar opportunities for reflection (p.27).

3. Conceptual Ideas

In exploring the intricate relationship between silence, poetry, and literacy, we draw upon two significant philosophical concepts: Martin Heidegger's notion of "dwelling thinking" and Roland Barthes' distinction between "Work" and "Text." These ideas offer a deeper understanding of how language, silence, and interpretation interplay within literary and educational contexts. They serve as conceptual lenses through which we can examine the role of silence in shaping textual engagement and meaning-making processes.

3.1. Dwelling Thinking (Heidegger)

Martin Heidegger's concept of "dwelling thinking" offers a profound way of understanding the relationship between language, being, and poetry. Heidegger argues that poetry functions as a kind of "building" that encapsulates human experience, allowing individuals to dwell or "be" in the world in a more reflective and meaningful way (Heidegger, 1971). In this framework, language is not merely a tool for communication; rather, it is a 'shelter' that affords a structured, yet fluid, environment for thought. Through poetic expression, language creates a space where individuals can reflect on their existence and their sense of belonging in the world.

This notion of dwelling is deeply connected to the idea that poetry serves as a sanctuary for thought, offering a refuge where the complexities of human experience can be explored and understood. Heidegger suggests that in the act of dwelling, individuals are not just passively existing but are actively engaged in a process of reflection and understanding. The language of poetry, with its nuanced and layered meanings, provides the perfect medium for this kind of reflective dwelling. It allows individuals to inhabit their thoughts, explore their inner landscapes, and ultimately, find a sense of comfort and understanding in their connection to the world (Heidegger, 1971).

3.2. Work and Text (Barthes)

Roland Barthes' theory distinguishes between "Work" and "Text," offering a dynamic way of understanding how literature functions beyond its physical form. According to Barthes, a "Work" is the tangible product of an author, confined to the physical boundaries set by its creator (Barthes, 1977). This traditional view sees literature as a completed, fixed entity with meaning largely dictated by the author.

In contrast, Barthes' concept of "Text" is far more fluid and participatory. The "Text" is not just a physical object but a network of meanings and interpretations that extends beyond the author's original intentions. It is an ongoing process, one that requires the active engagement of the reader. In this view, the reader plays a crucial role in generating meaning, turning the "Text" into a site of play where interpretations are constantly evolving. The "Text" becomes a living entity, shaped by the reader's experiences, thoughts, and emotions, rather than a static object with a single, fixed meaning (Barthes, 1977). This shift from "Work" to "Text" underscores the importance of reader participation in the construction of meaning, suggesting the dynamic and fluid nature of textual interpretation.

4. Methodology

We are two researchers and teacher educators interested in literacy education and approaches to developing effective learning. In this study we employed a collaborative autoethnography approach,

focusing on the interplay between silence, poetry, and literacy in our autoethnographic and collegial discussions and writing. Collaborative autoethnography allows for personal creative writing, self-reflection, and critical collegial analysis, providing a comprehensive exploration of the researchers' experiences and insights (Chang et al. 2016). This methodology is particularly suitable for examining how silence and poetry can enhance literacy and reflective practices.

We engaged in personal creative and reflexive writing that included writing two poems, discussing the poems, and developing reflections about the poems. Each person wrote reflective pieces, detailing their encounters with silence in the poem and in their writing of the poem. This iterative process of writing, sharing, and reflecting allowed for a rich, multi-faceted examination of silence (Hernandez et al. 2017).

In addition to collaborative autoethnography, this study incorporates poetic inquiry, a qualitative research method that uses poetry to explore ideas and evoke reflection (Faulkner, 2019). Poetic inquiry involves creating and analysing poems to capture and convey complex emotional and cognitive experiences. As researchers, we composed poems based on our reflections on silence in the context of literacy teaching, using poetic sensibilities to express nuanced understandings that might be difficult to articulate through traditional prose (Prendergast, 2009). Poetic inquiry was a natural extension of our own creative practices as poets.

The use of poetic inquiry complements the collaborative autoethnography by providing an additional layer of meaning and insight. Through the creation and analysis of poetry, we were able to purposefully explore/interrogate our experiences related to both the theme and the process of the writing. We thus offer a holistic perspective on the role of silence in poetic writing practices, literacy and education, strongly informed by and referenced to the academic literature and our extensive experiences as educators in school, adult and university education (Faulkner, 2019; Butler-Kisber, 2010).

4.1. Data collection processes and texts

Data creation in this inquiry involved the following processes:

1. *Preliminary meetings.* Two preliminary meetings to construct the approach to the inquiry and to discuss ideas and relevant literature.
2. *Intensive session.* Creation of poetry and reflections about the poetry in one 90-minute intensive session that involved writing of one poem each, then autoethnographic reflective writing about this poem, followed by collegial discussions about both.
3. *Post-session analytical writing.* After the intensive session, we each analysed each other's poem and reflection, drawing on ideas from Heidegger and Barthes and the academic literature, and wrote about implications for literacy education.

By collecting autoethnographic data as part of this poetic inquiry and providing collaborative analytical texts, this study offers a unique and profound exploration of silence, poetry, and literacy in education, highlighting the transformative potential of these elements in fostering reflective and meaningful learning experiences.

5. Findings

In the findings section, we present a deep exploration of how silence might operate within the realms of poetry, pedagogy, and literacy. Through the analysis of two original poems with reflective commentary and analysis, we uncover our thinking about the multifaceted roles silence plays in fostering reflective thinking, emotional engagement, and creative interpretation within educational contexts, especially literacy education. The order of the presentation of the texts is important. There is a poem about silence by each author with a reflection on the poem by the same author to establish the author's personal understandings about the poem and the notion of silence. These two pieces are followed by an analysis of the poem and the reflection by the other author and then a discussion of the implication for literacy practice. Together, this set of texts provides a range of perspectives around the ideas of silence, literacy and poetry.

5.1. Poem 1 (Waterhouse)**Silence is**

Silence is sometimes one thing, sometimes another.

Silence is restful, relaxing, regenerative.

Silence is tense, anxious, expectant.

Comforting or threatening, it depends.

Silence can be solitary or communal, it depends.

Sometimes silence is sacred, a sanctuary, a blessing.

More than the absence of sound

Silence is peace, sometimes.

Silence is a space for reflection, analysis, language processing.

Silence allows for speculation, imagination, creativity.

In teaching silence is heretical.

Silence can be scary, for students and teachers alike.

Silence is pedagogical dynamite, powerful and perilous.

Silence is an invitation, pregnant with possibilities.

Yet who knows what monsters, or angels, silence might bring forth?

Silence can birth embarrassment, ridicule and shame

As well as pride, humour, joy and fulfilment.

Silence is never really empty.

Silence may be an unheard voice screaming to be heard.

1) Reflection

As I reflect on my newly created poem, I am struck by the way it represents the contingent and contextual nature of silence. As a poet, a researcher and a teacher I am wrestling here with the notion that silence can embody a range of meanings. Although titled “Silence is” my poem is more exploratory than definitive. Adopting Barthes’ frame, the poem as “Text” is playing with multiple meanings, opening diverse possibilities, including the idea that silence not so much “is”, but “can be” many things if linked to personal experience when the conditions are “right”. This, in turn, begs important questions about the enabling conditions for productive pedagogical silence.

Re-reading the poem I recognise that my observation about silence being heretical in teaching is grounded in my belief that there is often too much noise in education; much of it coming from teachers. There is a presumption that talking is teaching, listening is learning, and silence with neither teacher nor students talking is a complete waste of time. None of these three statements is true. Talking isn’t teaching; learning involves more than listening; and silence is generative, it’s far from a waste of time. Yet the focus on talk, especially teacher-talk, remains persistent and ubiquitous, reinforcing the notion that it is only through talking that learning happens.

Silence is more than the absence of noise; silence is the sacred space that allows educational processes to bubble and brew. Pedagogically we might think of this as simmering silence. The generative potential of silence lies in the way it is created, crafted, and positioned. As within music, the making of silence is the making of the setting, the context, the circumstances for the silence, what comes before and after. We need to be appropriately pedagogically primed for silence.

The pedagogical productivity of silence also lies in the web of relationships within which the silence is generated and held. It is generative when there is a climate of trust established, so that the unexpected, the unconventional, sometimes even the unacceptable can be voiced, negotiated, considered. Yet, as the poem suggests, there is also pedagogical risk-taking involved in embracing silence; like all true forms of creativity there is some unpredictability, uncertainty. The outcome isn't guaranteed.

There is also the lingering possibility that silence is a cover, sometimes a shield consciously held; but sometimes also more akin to a muffling blanket that conceals and suppresses the "unheard voices". I am disturbed by this thought and find myself straining for the voices that have not yet been heard.

2) Analysis

The poem "Silence is" and the accompanying reflection explore the nuanced and multifaceted nature of silence, particularly in educational and literacy contexts. Heidegger's notion of "dwelling thinking" is evident in the way the poem constructs silence as a dynamic space for reflection and understanding. Silence is depicted as both a refuge and a challenge, offering a sanctuary for contemplation and creativity, yet also presenting a space potentially fraught with tension and uncertainty. This aligns with Heidegger's idea that poetry and language create a "shelter" for human experience, providing a structured environment where individuals can explore their being and find release. The poem captures this essence by presenting silence as a complex construct that holds the potential for profound personal and pedagogical insights.

Barthes' distinction between "Work" and "Text" further informs the analysis of both the poem and the reflection. The poem acts as a "Text" in Barthes' sense, inviting readers to engage actively with its meanings and possibilities. Rather than presenting a fixed definition, the poem opens up a "site of play" where silence is not rigidly defined but is presented as a fluid concept that can be interpreted in multiple ways. The reflection reinforces this by acknowledging the poem's exploratory nature, underlining the idea that silence can take on various forms depending on the context and conditions.

In the context of education and literacy, the poem challenges traditional assumptions about the role of silence, suggesting that it is not merely an absence of sound but a powerful pedagogical tool. The reflection expands on this by advocating for the intentional crafting and positioning of silence within educational settings. The generative potential of silence lies in creating an environment where trust and openness allow for unexpected and unconventional ideas to emerge. This "simmering silence" can nurture deeper understanding and facilitate meaningful engagement in learning and literacy, echoing both Heidegger's and Barthes' ideas that language and silence together can create a transformative and participatory space. Both the poem and reflection suggest that silence, when appropriately embraced and facilitated, can lead to significant meaning-formation in literacy contexts.

3) Implications for literacy education

The poem "Silence is" and Peter's reflection about it point to the potentially significant implications of silence in literacy education. Silence in classrooms might be perceived as a negative space, void of learning. However, recent scholarship challenges this view, proposing that silence can be a dynamic and transformative pedagogical tool that enhances comprehension, offers space for conceptualisation and allows for deeper responses to texts (Hanna, 2021). Indeed, silence can be leveraged to promote deeper engagement with texts, facilitating reflection and critical thinking among students (Waite, 2023). A specific example of employing silence in a classroom could involve English students reading a challenging poem independently. Following the reading, the teacher facilitates a structured "silent reflection" period where students jot down their thoughts, emotions, or questions in response to the text. This quiet time allows for deeper engagement, conceptualisation, and critical insights before dialogic group engagement.

In literacy education, silence serves as a space where students can process and internalise language, aiding interpretation and developing meaningful content in writing (Blackmore, 2024). This aligns with Heidegger's concept of "dwelling thinking," where silence acts as a 'structure' for thought,

allowing students to explore meanings and connections in texts without the immediate pressure of verbal responses (Heidegger, 1971). Moreover, silence can cultivate a climate of trust, encouraging students to voice unconventional or creative insights without fear of judgment, reflecting Barthes' idea of text as an open, interpretative space (Barthes, 1977).

In the poem there is an emphasis on silence as "pedagogical dynamite" and this suggests the potential to disrupt traditional classroom dynamics in which speaking is privileged, especially the speaking of the teacher. The poem and Peter's reflection on the poem invites educators to reconsider how silence can be intentionally integrated into literacy practices to foster a dialogic space where diverse interpretations and ideas can emerge not just through talk and dialogue, but in deliberative creative silence (Alexander, 2017). When silence is embraced and strategically positioned, it encourages students to engage with texts on a deeper level, allowing for personal connections and collective meaning-making.

Ultimately, incorporating silence in literacy education requires a shift from teacher-centred talk to a more balanced approach that values quiet reflection as a legitimate part of the learning process. By creating "simmering silence" in classrooms, educators can enable students to process language at their own pace, promoting a richer understanding of texts and enhancing their literacy skills across a range of modalities.

5.2. Poem 2 (Creely)

Silence waits as a friend

In the crowded spaces of learning,
where sounds rise like waves in a storm,
silence waits as friend who whispers
gently and looks without confusion.

This friend lives in the space between words,
where thoughts find their proper shape
unhindered by the rush of discordant clanging
and the weight of social expectations.

In silence, the mind can wander to places unseen,
and fly on paths of discovery, new and fresh,
in the quiet of breath that has a freedom
beyond the strictures in which we exist.

Here, literacy is born anew as unmeasured potential,
not in the frantic turning and churning of pages
but in the stillness and space of deep comprehension,
in the pause that precedes and is vital for understanding.

In this hush where we sense our being, we learn to listen,
not just to others, but to the voices that echo within,

to the pulse of our own thoughts and feelings,
and to the natural rhythm of our beating selves.

1) *Reflection*

In re-reading my poem just written, I am struck by its profound exploration of silence as a transformative force in learning and education. In our world, where sound is often synonymous with productivity and interaction, the poem reflects my view that silence is not just a pause between actions but a dynamic and essential presence (a friend) that fosters deeper understanding and supports self-discovery.

In the poem I reflect on the crowded spaces of learning, likening the cacophony of sounds to waves in a storm. This imagery resonates with me as I think about how educational environments can often feel overwhelming, where voices and expectations compete for attention, leaving little room for the practice of introspection. I see, in this context, silence as a friend, one who whispers and observes without confusion. This portrayal reflects my perception of silence as more than an absence of sound; instead, it suggests that silence is a guiding presence that can help untangle the noise and chaos of learning.

As the poem unfolds, I explore the idea that silence inhabits the space between words, allowing thoughts to find their form and be constituted fully. This notion is particularly important when considering literacy practices. Traditional literacy often emphasises the consumption and production of language—reading, writing, speaking. However, in the poem I propose a literacy of silence, where understanding is nurtured in the stillness and depth of contemplation. In this silence, the mind is free to explore, to wander down new paths of discovery unencumbered by the "discordant clanging" of external pressures and expectations.

The poem reflects my vision of silence as a foundational source for literacy, and this is a radical shift in how literacy education is often practiced. Rather than viewing silence as an absence to be filled with instruction, it becomes a space where learning is reborn, where comprehension takes root and flourishes. This perspective invites educators and learners alike to value the pauses, to see them as opportunities for insights that emerge only when the din subsides. Furthermore, in the poem I also present silence as a tool for listening—not just to others but as a place for self. In the quiet, we attune to the "pulse of our own thoughts and feelings," and this inner listening becomes an animated component of learning. It is in these moments of reflection that we can really engage with our inner voices and emotions, understanding ourselves better and aligning our learning with who we really are.

In writing the poem, I reflect my wish to integrate more silence into my own learning practices. It reminds me that genuine understanding often requires stepping back from the rush and noise, allowing space for ideas to germinate and grow. Silence, then, is not a void but a loom on which the grand tapestry of comprehension and creativity can be woven. It is an antidote to the relentless pace of contemporary existence and a powerful ally in the pursuit of knowledge and wellbeing.

2) *Analysis*

"Silence waits as a friend" presents a text inviting exploration and playful interpretation (Barthes, 1977). Who is this friend? Why are they here? Why are they waiting? Who are they waiting for? Anyone perhaps, who might care to stop. The poem (as text) invites consideration of the relationship between the reader, and the friend. There's a sense of comfort in this friend not only being present, but seemingly calm, gentle, and "without confusion" amidst the noise and chaos of the learning environment. The friend seems unaffected by the pedagogical "storm". There is safety in the "space between words". This is reassuring.

The potential meaning/s of this friend's presence and friendship extend beyond the poem as a completed "Work". To put it another way, by playing with the poem as text we may see the friend as a metaphorical aid to reading comprehension, learning and meaning making. It is as if there is a literacy learning coach buried between the lines of the text, simply waiting to be asked. For it is in the "space between the words" and in the relationships between them that understandings and interpretations may be forged. This is the "space of deep comprehension". However, there is no single, fixed, 'correct' answer to the question, what does this poem mean? Silence "as a friend" may take

many forms and commune with us in different ways, taking us off to “places unseen” and “paths of discovery new and fresh”.

The idea that the silence is a space between also resonates with Heidegger’s (1971) notion of dwelling place. There is a sanctuary of silent refuge within the spaces. The wider world, with its “discordant clanging” and “weight of social expectations” is held at bay; and “within the pause” there is a safe space for “the quiet breath”. Within this dwelling place the mind is free because it is secure, it can come to no harm. The dwelling place and the friend provide stewardship for a sanctuary of thought founded in and bounded by silence.

This understanding also resonates effectively with the work of Fraser (2012) who stresses the importance of deliberately pausing to give conscious attention to what he calls the “Third Space”, the space in between one task and the next in our daily lives. Recognising, valuing and using this space effectively is, Fraser argues, essential to living a happy, productive and balanced life.

Ed’s poem and reflection also provide the rich insight that in silence “we learn to listen, not just to others, but to the voices that echo within”. Silence is offered as a tool for listening to ourselves. In the quiet we are tuned “to the pulse of our own thoughts and feelings”. Inner listening and introspection become an animated component of our learning. Listening to your own self and being in tune with who you are and what a text might mean for you is an important skill. This is particularly important when engaging with artistic and literary texts, including poetry. This capacity reflects what Gardner (1985) in his theory of multiple intelligences, refers to as intrapersonal intelligence; and it resonates with Goleman (1996) highlighting the importance of emotional intelligence or “EQ”. This inner dialogue asks not only what might this text mean? But also, what does this mean *to me*? And *why* does it matter? These are key questions in critical literacy pedagogy.

3) *Implications for literacy education*

As I think further about language and literacy pedagogy and my waiting friend, I am reminded of the value of silence. I think, for instance, of my EAL learners and how they often need some time in silence to process what has been said, or what they are reading. They need to translate the language, determine their understanding/s, frame their response/s in English as their second, third, or sometimes fourth language; and then speak, or write. As a monolingual speaker I am in awe of their linguistic capabilities. I strive to be their supportive waiting friend in silence.

For EAL students, teachers could create structured silent processing time after reading or discussing an English text, including poetry. For example, following a group discussion, students can be given five minutes to silently translate key concepts into their first language, jot down reflections, or prepare responses in English. This supports cognitive processing and inclusivity. This would be followed by a whole class sharing of the outcome of the silent time.

I also think of our neuro-divergent learners, those living on the autism spectrum for instance, with lives over-filled with a cacophony of noise, visual and sensory inputs. They also need this friend. They need spaces and places to think, to be in touch with their body and “the pulse of [their] own thoughts and feelings”. I am also reminded also of the work of Susan Cain (2013) in *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can’t stop talking*.

“Silence waits as a friend” and Ed’s reflection on it highlights the noisy, crowded, pedagogical density of so much classroom interaction. It is stormy, sometimes chaotic; and whilst some students can metaphorically surf or dive through the big waves, others are at risk of drowning. The more I reflect on silence as a friend the more I see that welcoming and sustaining this metaphorical friend in the classroom is an essential element in inclusive pedagogy, not only for literacy education but across a wide range of teaching and learning contexts.

In supportive silence the mind is free to explore, to wander down new paths; to identify new possibilities, to be creative; including creativity in the processes of interpreting texts. But the pedagogical decision that teachers need to make is to create, quite deliberately, these spaces of silence; or to use Heidegger’s thinking, these dwelling places, where deeper thinking, or what Newport (2016) calls “deep work” can occur. This all takes some time and attention to pedagogical design. Such time probably needs to come from teacher talk time; challenging the presumption that when the teacher is talking optimal student learning is simultaneously taking place.

6. Discussion

The exploration of silence within the context of literacy, poetry, and education offers rich and multifaceted insights into how silence operates as a pedagogical tool. Through our creative and autoethnographic poetic inquiry we sought to broaden the understanding of silence beyond its conventional interpretation as merely an absence of sound or speech. Instead, we understand silence as a dynamic, generative force that can profoundly enhance the learning process, particularly in literacy and textual engagement.

6.1. Silence as an Integral Component of Literacy

Silence plays a crucial role in literacy education by facilitating deeper levels of engagement and comprehension. As highlighted in our poems and reflections in this study, silence serves as a space for contemplation, allowing learners to process and internalise what they read (Bao, 2020; Hanna, 2021). This is particularly pertinent in the context of poetry, where the meaning often resides not only in the words themselves but also in the spaces between them—the pauses, the breaks, and the silences that punctuate the text. In a poetry lesson as part of English, literacy or Literature, for example, teachers could implement a "silent pause" activity where students read a poem aloud, then pause for 30 seconds to reflect on the spaces and breaks in the text. They then write down interpretations of how these silences contribute to the poem's meaning.

In line with Heidegger's notion of dwelling thinking, we suggest that silence can be seen as a shelter for thought, where the reader can inhabit the text, explore its nuances, and develop a personal connection with it (Heidegger, 1971). This approach contrasts with the more common teaching strategies that prioritise talk and verbal expression as the primary means of engagement in learning spaces. In this way, silence allows for a deeper, more reflective form of learning that can generate more profound understanding of texts.

The concept of silence as an integral part of literacy education also aligns with Roland Barthes' idea of the Text as a site of play, where meanings are not fixed but are constantly being generated and reinterpreted through the reader's interaction with the text (Barthes, 1977). Silence, in this context, is not empty but filled with potentiality, where the reader can engage with the text in a more personal and creative way. This dynamic interaction between silence and text encourages students to become active participants in the meaning-making process, rather than passive recipients of information.

6.2. Silence, Poetry, and Literacy

The intersection of silence, poetry, and literacy offers a new perspective on how these elements can be integrated into educational practices. Poetry, with its unique reliance on rhythm, cadence, and the unsaid, naturally lends itself to the exploration of silence as a powerful tool for meaning making. In our poetry and reflections in this article we asserted that the silences in poetry are not merely absences but are charged with meaning, inviting readers to engage in reading that has depth and introspection.

In the context of literacy education, this suggests that educators should not only teach students how to read and interpret the words on the page but also how to engage with the silences that surround those words. This requires a shift to appreciation of the role that silence plays in the construction of meaning. By integrating silence into literacy practices, educators can help students develop a more nuanced understanding of texts, and an appreciation of the poststructuralist idea that the meanings in texts are a product of the complex interactions of a text with the experiences of a reader (Waite, 2023).

Furthermore, the reflective writing and discussions that accompany the poetic inquiry in this study highlight the importance of silence in the creative process.

Silence allows for a space where ideas can gestate, where connections can be made, and where new insights can emerge. This is particularly important in the context of writing, where the pressure to produce can sometimes stifle creativity. By embracing silence as an integral part of the writing process, students can be encouraged to take their time, to reflect deeply on their ideas, and to produce work that is thoughtful and well-considered, and in which content is just as important as structure. For example, during writing sessions, teachers can implement "silent brainstorming" where students pause before speaking or beginning writing to reflect on their ideas, jotting down key concepts in a structured outline or create a visual map. This encourages thoughtful content development and values the

importance of ideas and structure equally, fostering a deliberate and reflective approach to the writing process.

Poetry is thus highlighted as a medium that can open interpretative spaces for learners, allowing them to bring their experiences and create personal meaning. The discussion reflects on how poetry and reflective writing can engage both teachers and students in exploring emotional and intellectual depths, fostering a more nuanced understanding of texts and learning processes.

6.3. Silence as a Pedagogical Tool

The employment of silence as a purposeful pedagogical tool offers several benefits that are often overlooked in conventional educational practices that are built on talk and interaction. One of the key insights from our reflexive study is the idea that silence can serve as a bubbling space, where ideas can simmer and brew before being articulated (Waite, 2023). This simmering silence is not a passive waiting period but an active process of mental engagement, where learners are given the time and space to reflect, process, and formulate their thoughts. Silence is thus a space where students can process information, engage in speculative and inferential thinking, and explore their thoughts without immediate pressure. This approach challenges the conventional emphasis on teacher-talk and constant verbal interaction in the classroom. As the poem "Silence is" suggests, there is often too much noise in education, much of it coming from teachers who feel the need to constantly fill the silence with instruction (Waite, 2023). However, in this study we argue that by creating intentional moments of silence, educators can foster a more thoughtful and reflective learning environment. As part of Alexander's (2017) concept of dialogic teaching, we advocate for a more balanced approach to classroom interaction, where silence is valued as much as speech, and in counterpoint to talk. For example, during class discussions, teachers could introduce "reflective silence breaks," where students pause for 30-60 seconds after a discussion question is posed. This designed silence allows students to process the question, consider their responses, and prepare thoughtful contributions.

Moreover, the generative potential of silence is enhanced when it is situated within a web of relationships built on trust and openness. In such environments, silence can become a space where novel ideas can emerge. This resonates with the findings of Cain (2013) in her work on introversion, where she argues that silence and solitude are essential for creativity and deep thinking. In educational settings, promoting a climate where silence is respected and encouraged can lead to more meaningful and innovative outcomes in students' learning.

6.4. Implications for Educational Practice

The insights gained from this study have several important implications for educational practice, particularly in the areas of literacy and writing instruction. Firstly, educators should consider incorporating more intentional moments of silence into their teaching strategies. This could involve pausing after reading a poem or a complex passage to allow students time to reflect before discussing it. These moments of silence can help students internalise what they have read, because of think-time and imaginative exploration that can be afforded by stopping. Secondly, there is a need for educators to shift their perspective on silence from seeing it as a void or a lack of engagement (and thus to be avoided, even feared) recognising it as a vital component of the learning process. This shift requires a re-evaluation of classroom practices that privilege constant verbal interaction and teacher-talk. Instead, educators should strive to create a more punctuated learning environment where silence is valued as a space for reflection, contemplation, and creative thinking.

Thirdly, the findings of this study suggest that silence can play a key role in fostering inclusivity in the classroom. For students who may struggle with verbal expression, whether due to language barriers, being a minority, introversion, or neurodivergence, silence can provide a safe and supportive space where they can engage with the material at their own pace (Kaufman, 2008). By creating a classroom environment that respects and encourages silence, educators can help all students, regardless of their individual needs and abilities, to participate more fully in the learning process at their own pace. Finally, the integration of silence into literacy education has the potential to enhance students' critical thinking and interpretive skills (Blackmore, 2024). By teaching students to engage with the silences in texts, educators can help them engage with the nuances of texts and foster their ability to think critically about language and meaning. This approach aligns with the goals of critical literacy, which seeks to empower students to question and challenge the texts they encounter, rather than simply accepting them at face value (Freire, 2018).

These ideas collectively underscore a more holistic, reflective, and student-centred approach to education, where silence, reflection, and emotional intelligence are integral to the learning process.

7. Conclusion

This poetic and autoethnographic inquiry has brought attention to the potentially profound and multifaceted role of silence in literacy education, including the context of poetry. By exploring silence as more than just an absence of sound, but rather as a dynamic and generative force in meaning-making, this study highlights how silence can enhance textual engagement, imagination, and interpretation. Through the reflective analysis of personal poetic texts, we have demonstrated how silence can shape the reader's interaction with the text, influencing cognitive and emotional responses, and ultimately fostering a richer comprehension of language. We have also explored the pedagogical implications, noting both the 'what' and examples of the 'how' of bringing purposeful silence to the classroom.

However, the study's autoethnographic presentation presents certain limitations. The personal and introspective focus, while offering rich, creative reflections, inherently narrows the scope of the findings. The insights gained are deeply tied to the specific experiences and interpretations of the researchers. Despite this limitation, the study's limited focus has allowed for a detailed and nuanced exploration of silence, offering valuable pedagogical insights that may inspire educators to consider more creative and reflective approaches that utilise silence in their teaching practices. Overall, this inquiry contributes to the ongoing discourse on innovative literacy education, advocating for the intentional integration of silence as a vital and transformative component of learning.

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