The quiet learner and the quiet teacher

Adenike Akinbode - Senior Lecturer, School of Education, University of Hertfordshire

As a teacher are you concerned about the quiet learners in your class? Do you feel that they sit back and let others do all the work? Do you find it necessary to coax quiet learners into participating more in class. Do you consider ‘quiet’ a flawed way of being? Given that teaching is a vocal profession, is it possible to be a quiet teacher?

Quiet is an aspect of diversity that is given little consideration in society and the education system. As a quiet person and teacher I chose to seek out research and literature relating to quiet personality types. I found that most literature comes from the USA, such as by Aron (1999), Kahnweiler (2009) and Cain (2012). I only found two studies relating to quiet teaching, Pailliotet (1997) and Collins & Ting (2010).

Collins & Ting (2010) and Pennington (2012) discuss how Carl Jung proposed two personality types, introverts who gain their energy from internal events, such as thinking and feeling, and extroverts who gain their energy from external events, such as social interaction and being active. Aron (1999) and Cain (2012) discuss research that suggests that there are physiological differences between introverts and extroverts. The research also suggests that there is a 50/50 split of introversion and extroversion in human populations. There have been arguments that people behave differently in different situations, and these personality types have been questioned. Pennington proposes a spectrum with introversion at one end and extroversion at the other. Most people would position themselves in between the two. In my view it might be helpful to consider this positioning to be dynamic, in which an individual might possibly favour one end of the introversion/extroversion spectrum for most of the time. The significant issue is that different societies tend to favour traits associated with the personality types.

In the USA and UK, society favours extrovert traits like talking and much social activity. China and Japan are societies which favour introvert traits such as quiet thoughtfulness. This means that social conditioning within societies encourages individuals to behave in the desired way. Cain writes about attitudes in the USA:

"Extroversion is an enormously appealing personality style but, we’ve turned it into an oppressive standard to which most of us feel we must conform."
Since, in the UK, society also favours extroversion, the introvert is often considered to be flawed. This is due to a lack of understanding about introversion. Pennington considers:

Male introverts suffer in Western culture, often described as lazy, soft, gay or unsociable. Female introverts can be taunted as weird, distant, aloof and arrogant and are therefore ostracised.

(Cain 2012:4)

Cain (2012) discusses how research shows that most teachers consider the extrovert as the ideal student. The education system is designed for the extrovert. In the UK the school classroom is designed with the extrovert in mind. Assumptions are made that the silent introvert is doing nothing, and this is considered to be undesirable. This situation is due to a lack of understanding of the behaviour and needs of the introvert. The characteristics of the introvert include the following:

- Prefer to process ideas through thinking and reflection before talking
- Might have plenty to say - when they are ready
- Engage in deep conversation often with one person
- Often find contentment in quiet time alone e.g. reading, walking and thinking rather than partying
- Often happy to be with other people sitting in silence
- Often spend time ‘people watching’ quietly noticing behaviour and interaction.

An issue for introvert learners is that they need time for thinking and processing. Being picked on in class to speak out can be very uncomfortable for an introvert. Unfortunately, teachers often assume that an introvert student or pupil’s silence is laziness. Another issue for introvert learners is that when they are ready to speak they need extroverts to stop talking and give them the space to be heard.

Another aspect of introversion is high sensitivity. Aaron’s (1999) research suggests that 70% of highly sensitive people are also introverts. The characteristics of highly sensitive people are as follows:

- Very sensitive to physical stimuli e.g. light and sound
- Very sensitive to the moods of others
- Need regular quiet time alone (especially after a lot of interaction)
- Pick up on atmospheres and things that others miss

These issues have serious implications for classroom practice. A highly sensitive learner might find a crowded and noisy classroom rather overwhelming, needing quiet space in order to re-charge effectively. Awareness of diversity among learners is important to consider in education practice to promote equity. This means that teachers and organisations need to be aware of the needs of the quiet learners who might be introverts and highly sensitive. Quiet strengths need to be considered such as the following characteristics:

- Thoughtfulness (before speaking)
- Thinking through issues thoroughly before taking action
- Good active listening
- Good at noticing what others miss
- Engaging in quiet leadership.

It is considered desirable that the teaching population reflects the diversity of the learner population. This means that the strengths of quiet teaching should be considered and encouraged. Collins & Ting (2010) found in their study with quiet student teachers that it was important to enable and support the students in developing their own style of teaching. The quiet student who was supported in developing her practice in her own way progressed and flourished. The quiet student who was urged to act more outgoing than she felt failed her teaching practice and was exhausted. When she later was supported in developing her own style of teaching she progressed well. Collins & Ting found that quiet teachers had particular strengths in moving around the classroom and working well with small groups of children, rather than putting on a whole class performance. Ultimately teachers, whether they are introverts or extroverts need to be aware of their own personality type and preferences. Teachers need to be aware of the needs of the learners who might be different from themselves. The classroom environment and teaching approaches need to be carefully considered in order to support all learners effectively. In a society that values extroversion, the needs of the quiet learner and the strengths of the quiet teacher need to be acknowledged.

**Quiet: The power of the 'introvert'**

Watch Susan Cain’s TED2012 talk.
Read 'Voices of children aged 10 and 11 revisited...'

References