“When the pandemic hit, my clients needed support and strategies — not jokes.”

Laughter brings joy to a learning environment. Humor increases engagement and encourages the brain to retain information. As an education consultant specializing in social and emotional learning (SEL), I have found that even the corniest joke can improve participants’ learning.

When the pandemic hit, my clients needed support and strategies — not jokes. So I started using more trauma-sensitive strategies like deep breathing, and body awareness in SEL trainings and meetings with school district staff. For example, a deep breath calms the nervous system and allows us to stay in our “thinking brains.”

This worked well until Memorial Day 2020 when George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police.

A week later, I co-lead a video call with a small rural school district in the South. I began the session with a moment of silence for Floyd. We continued with an activity where participants acknowledged and named their feelings after looking at an array of emoticons. I have done this activity dozens of times on Zoom since March, typically resulting in a wide distribution of emotions. But this time, participants identified with the sad face over and over again. One participant simply drew a broken heart on the screen.

Later, I learned that many members of the district staff had spent the morning waiting for someone to acknowledge their pain, their despair, their need to grieve, and consign their resolve. Instead, they were faced with a grave omission — district meetings reflected business as usual. Several staff members later told me that the shared moment of silence had been particularly meaningful with tension running high as confederate statues began to topple nearby. This brief moment of silence, in fact, broke a silence on issues of race and racism. Since then, the district has started to call on their collective commitment to SEL to enter into courageous and necessary conversations — to really listen to each other talk about their own experiences and perspectives. While they haven’t made any lasting changes yet, they have begun the challenging work of unpacking the inequities baked into their system. I admire the district staff for the courageous way they are leaning into SEL as a tool for adults to confront the proverbial “elephant in the room” that is systemic racism in education.

This contrast between a moment of silence and systems of silence urged me to reflect on the different ways silence can engage and disengage us. Silence can be respectful and contemplative. Silence can be afraid. Silence can be spiteful or even deafening. When people in power stay silent, they dismiss and inhibit the kind of meaningful conversation that leads to growth. In contrast, silence can provide space for looking inward to better understand our emotions, reflect on our behavior, and examine the impact we have on others. The absence of noise allows us to hit pause on external inputs and go within ourselves to listen. Understanding our own thoughts and feelings precedes individual as well as collective change. And sometimes silence is needed for constructive dialogue to begin.

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