

Stilling, Guided Imagery or Scripted Fantasy

Stilling is a method of developing children's spiritual awareness. The activity of stilling is a lead-in to meditation and could thus be an appropriate exercise to undertake when thinking about meditation in one of the great world faiths (although we do NOT suggest that you attempt true meditation in the classroom). Guided imagery is also used in many different world faiths as a creative way of helping people visualise truths or as a form of personal spiritual exercise e.g. the Ignatian Exercises in Christianity, or the Buddhist Tibetan Book of the Dead.

METHOD

(a) Stilling

Begin by making sure the children are sitting in an "alert and relaxed position". This means sitting so they are not touching anything or anyone, back against the chair back, feet flat on floor, hands resting in a cup-like position on the lap, or on the knees. The teacher talks the children through the exercise slowly and calmly, leaving appropriate gaps.

A very simple breathing exercise would be :

*"Let your eyes gently close....
Breathe slowly in and out, in and out...
Now begin to listen to sounds outside this room.....
Now listen to the sounds inside this room.....
Now listen to yourself....
Notice the way your breath enters and leaves your body.....
Concentrate on the tip of your nose and feel your breath go in and out, in and out.....
Now feel how hard your chair is underneath you.....
When you are ready, open your eyes and have a good stretch...."*

The exercise can take as long or as short an amount of time as is appropriate - you will be able to sense the atmosphere in the room and react accordingly. Children who become used to stilling exercises will be able to go for longer and longer periods of time.

Stilling exercises can best be used when undertaking work on worship, particularly Buddhism.

A variant of the stilling exercise, using all the senses, can be an appropriate way of sensing the atmosphere of a place of worship you visit, or other special place. If you are using this e.g. on a church visit, it is best to undertake the stilling exercise first, before any other activities.

Always debrief after a stilling exercise.

(b) Guided Fantasy

Select a story from the faith tradition which you are studying and which will appeal to your class' imagination e.g. the Exodus from Egypt, the Christmas Story (see example), a story from the life of the Buddha, a pilgrim going on Hajj. Write a story outline with open-ended questions which allows pupils to fill in their own descriptive and sensory details e.g:

*"Today we are going to visit the stable at Bethlehem...
What does the outside look like...
Can you hear or see what is going on inside.....
Go into the stable...
Is it dark or light.....
What can you see....
What can you smell.....
Can you hear any sounds...
Are there any animals in the stable....
Look around carefully and see what people are there....."*

Do you recognise who any of the people are.....
 Choose someone nearby to talk to.....
 Ask them what is happening...
 Can you see the baby in the manger....
 Go and take a closer look.....
 What is he doing.....
 Are you allowed to touch him.....
 Think what you will want to tell your friends about this when you get home.....
 It is time to go home now, open your eyes slowly and give yourself a shake.....

The guided fantasy is set up in the same way as the stilling exercise (sitting alert yet relaxed etc) although some people prefer to use the hall and have children laying on the floor.

With a guided fantasy it is important that:

- Children have sufficient background knowledge to help them engage with the story successfully e.g. they've heard a version of the story before, or had the opportunity to study photographs of the place the story is set.
- There is sufficient time for a class debriefing session afterwards

You may wish to follow the guided fantasy with a creative exercise such as art or story writing, to capture the different types of responses. If you do so, it is probably best to leave the whole class debriefing until later - younger children in particular will often imitate their neighbour's ideas rather than give voice to their own, if they think you perceive that answer as in some way "better"!

POSSIBLE PITFALLS

Most children enjoy stilling exercises and guided fantasies, and actually benefit from them, but some people find them difficult to cope with. It is important to let children know it is

alright to peep if they feel insecure with their eyes closed (we all need reassurance that this is not some trick and everyone is laughing at us!). If pupils feel very unhappy with the exercise then they must be allowed to opt out in a way that doesn't disturb others.

There are no right or wrong answers in creative visualisation. For example, you may find when you debrief that a child's "Christmas Story" is full of rockets and spacemen.....this may not be what you were expecting, but it is their *personal* vision, and needs to be valued as such.

The teacher has to feel happy to undertake this activity as well as the pupils - if you cannot see the worth of what is being done, or you are anxious about it, it will show in your voice and affect the way the exercise works out...or doesn't.

Do not use a fantasy exercise to indoctrinate children, or "trick" them into a "religious experience". Properly used, fantasy can be a memorable way of getting pupils more involved with their subject, but remember it is also a powerful tool which religions have used for centuries! (*An example of this wrong use of suggestion in the Christmas example above would have been to ask pupils to worship the baby in the manger. Note how the fantasy has deliberately avoided all value loaded instructions of this kind.*)

RESOURCES

We especially like: "**Don't just do something, sit there**" by Mary Stone RMEP. It's simple, practical and packed with examples of real children!

For a thorough and practical discussion of the benefits of meditation try "**Teaching Meditation to Children**" by David Fontana and Ingrid Slack. Element Books, ISBN 1862040184. £7 99p.