

Project »Sound Break« Regensburg 2009

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With the pilot project »Sound Break Regensburg 2009« Hella and Luis Erler examine the effects of short (2- 5 minutes) relaxation sessions with singing bowls in kindergartens and schools. Given the high level of stress experienced by nursery and school teachers, the question was asked as to whether »sound breaks« can lower the noise level and lead to greater relaxation and concentration. An initial preliminary assessment has shown that these effects were felt by all participants.

1. Background and objectives

The project »Sound Break« focuses on the implementation of singing bowls for stress reduction in kindergartens and schools. We are interested in the relaxation effects that can be realized with singing bowls in an everyday school setting. Stress negatively impacts our health and ability to learn, especially when feelings of anxiety, threat, or insecurity are present. Stress is the number one cause of burnout for teachers. With children, stress is presumed to contribute to disorders in learning and concentration. Relaxation provides the potential to prevent stress from arising in the first place, or to reduce responses to stress. In addition to many other relaxation methods, working with singing bowls is **one** option for stress reduction. Singing bowls can quickly lead to greater peace and calm. They provide a broad range of sensory stimuli. Just their shiny exterior draws attention. The sound frequencies they produce, which are physically perceived as tingling, flowing, or vibrations, support redirecting attention to the inner realm – they invite awareness. Another special feature is that the sounds of the slinging bowls are not associated with any judgment – there are no assessments as to, for example, being musical or unmusical, right or wrong.

Singing bowls can be implemented in a number of ways. For example, they can be used to support the »silence game« , which Maria Montessori incorporated into her education approach 100 years ago to support learning capability, reduce the noise level of groups, and to strengthen cohesiveness of children in a group. Maria Montessori was the first

to describe that total concentration on an object, which she referred to as »polarization of attention«, is a prerequisite for absorbing new information and anchoring it memory. The »silence game« by Maria Montessori is played with various materials and exercises. We had the idea that singing bowls also lend themselves to such a »silence game« and call our approach to reducing stress and restlessness in children's groups the »sound break«.

In today's instructional setting, there are often unfavorable frameworks that make learning more difficult. We encounter children who suffer from problems at home, maladjustment, distraction (media), and emotional stressors. Class instruction is structured in such a way that, in general, subjects and teachers change every 45 to 60 minutes. Additionally, motivation, the »source« of learning is »crushed« rather than promoted through pressure to perform well on exams and discouragement due to poor grades. The learning environment in many schools is made even more difficult through children with a history of migration. These children often do not feel comfortable in their new environment, nor have they mastered the new language prior to attending school. Parental support fails due to the language barrier. One participant in our project who teaches a German language course for migrant children remarks:

»There is no involvement on the part of the parents. No one speaks German at these kids' homes.«

We know that teachers in this situation, in which they are unsuccessful in getting inattentive, non-motivated students to learn and to compensate for deficits, are at risk of burnout. Burnout syndrome is more prevalent among teachers than other professional groups.

A »sound break« that does not last for more than 2 – 5 minutes could be a helpful tool in the difficult everyday teaching environment for both teachers and students, if our assumption that even this small sound session can achieve reduction in stress, tension, and distraction is confirmed.

2. Course of the project

When we first thought of the idea of a »sound break«, we initially wanted to gain practical experience working with a small group (2 kindergarten groups and two school groups) to see if more extensive study was indicated. However, our idea was met with so much enthusiasm, that in addition to 4 nursery school teachers, 10 school teachers wanted to participate in the project (cf. table 1).

Our project »Sound Break« Regensburg 2009 started on October 1, 2009 with 14 participants who together supervised and taught a total of 281 children and teens 3 – 17 years of age. Our project group met for two information sessions: one regarding Peter Hess products® Himalaya quality singing bowls, and the other focusing on practical implementation of singing bowls. Between the two meetings, participants had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the contents of the »singing bowl boxes« that were kindly provided by the Peter Hess® Institute for the duration of the trial. The book »Singing bowls – playing and learning with all senses« by Emily Hess and Peter Hess (Munich: Kösel Publisher, 2017) gave participants the chance to gain practical experience in sound therapy.

In the meantime, we procured the necessary approvals from school administrations, the Department of Education, and in the case of private schools, the respective school boards. Implementation of the singing bowls in kindergartens and schools ran from November 16 to December 11, 2009, so that a total of 20 observation days were available.

Nursery and school teachers could determine for themselves as to how and when to use the »sound break« (2 – 5 minutes) in everyday kindergarten and school settings and modify the session according to their respective structure of teaching. None of the participants had any experience, training, or other information regarding singing bowls other than our introduction to them prior to the trial study. This prerequisite is very important for another »broad« application, because only a low-threshold therapy can be implemented at many facilities.

Table 1: Participants of the project

Facility	Supervisors/ Teachers	Children/Teens	Age Range
Kindergarten	4	38	3 – 6
Elementary school	8	178	6 – 10
Integrative class	1	39 ¹	9 – 10 / 6 – 7
Special needs school	1	8	7 – 9
High School	1	18	14 – 17
Total	14	281	3 – 17

¹ One teacher used singing bowls in 2 classrooms (3rd and 1st grade).
No. of students in 3rd grade: 24, no. of students in first grade: 15

Table 2: Observations and games/exercises

Facility	Observation Stage ¹	Individual Observations ²	Case Studies	Games / Exercises ³
Kindergarten	54	88	11	26
Elementary school	109	162	7	21
Integrative class	19	27	2	5
Special needs school	11	20	1	3
High School	12	--	--	9
Total	205	297	21	64

¹ This column indicates the number of days a daily log was completed.
² This column indicates the number of students who were especially observed in a situation.
³ The games / exercises indicated here overlap in part.

Results and a detailed evaluation thereof were published in the in the July 2010 edition of the magazine »MONTESSORI« of the German Montessori Association.

All nursery and school teachers agreed to keep a »sound diary« of their experiences with singing bowls, to observe reactions in groups of children and individual children, and to compile and document the implemented games/exercises. At the end of practical implementation, participants were asked to evaluate, by means of a questionnaire, how helpful and effective the singing bowls were specifically in terms of reducing stress and promoting relaxation. All participants' data was entered into a pre-prepared »project folder« (cf. table 2).



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3. Results

In the following, we present the results of the questions that focus on the basic success of the project. Primarily, we wanted to determine if a brief intervention such as a »sound break« (2 – 5 minutes!) can result in a distinctly perceivable effect: can instruction be positively impacted with brief sound therapy? Is stress really reduced? Are concentration and readiness to learn increased?

The current report is an **initial** evaluation (from point 6 of project folder: »Summary and Evaluation«). As a summarizing result, we can say that **all** participants are convinced of the positive effects of a »sound break« and **all** want to continue to work with singing bowls after project completion. We are awaiting more detailed indications from the analysis of daily logs and case studies. These were compiled from regular observations of a child over a longer period of time and therefore can shed more light on the process

of transformation. The following report of a teacher regarding an 8-year-old autistic student reflects such a process: »F., autistic, at first did not want to have anything to do with the singing bowl – wouldn't let it be close to him, pushed it away! After some time (2 or 3x) it was really fun for him to tap the singing bowl and he listened intently when other children tapped the singing bowls. During German lessons, I went to him several times with the singing bowl and noticed that he became more clam and worked with more focus. Surprisingly, at the end of the project, he picked up the bowls on his own, something he never done before. He seemed relaxed. You might say he accepted the bowl, finds »support in the bowl.«

In the following, we summarize the answers participants provided after implementation of the »sound break« for a maximum of 20 days. Eleven participants provided an overall evaluation, from the participant who implemented the singing bowls in 2 grades, we have two evaluations, so that we have a total of 13 overall evaluations.

In reference to the question »When I look back on the 4 weeks of implementation of the singing bowls in my group

...«, the majority of participants indicated more **quiet and relaxation** (total of 22 mentions). A positive impact on concentration was mentioned 9 times, and less frequent aggression 2 times.

In reference to the question if **inappropriate behavior** was reduced in the group, 7 responded with yes, and 4 with no. To the question if inappropriate behavior by individual children occurred less, 7 responded with yes and 3 with no. Here, the results are not as clear. However, we expect more highly differentiated conclusions through the evaluation of individual observations.

In the next question, participants were asked to assess the **relaxation effect** achieved through a »sound break«. The question was: »How would you rate the effect of the sound break on relaxation?« **All** observed increased relaxation; relaxation was categorized as »surprisingly intense« 4 times, as »significantly changed« 6 times, as (positively) »changed« 5 times and as »slightly changed« 1 time.



Photo (Peter Ferstl): Elementary school student in an integrative class during the game »the sound wanders«.

In reference to the question as to which aspect was affected the most, the majority of participants were convinced that the **emotional** aspect was most deeply affected (11 mentions), 8 mentions indicated the **social** aspect, 4 mentioned the motivational aspect, and 1 the cognitive aspect. This underscores the assessment that singing bowls address the child holistically, whereby the social / emotional aspect is in the forefront.

With respect to the question whether the »sound break« had an effect on **work behavior and performance**, most responded in the affirmative. The question was answered with a yes 10 times and only denied 2 times. Representative of similar observations, we present a case report by a teacher of an 8-year-old boy:

»Ever since starting school, P. has had difficulty writing (graphomotor skills). He is therefore in ergotherapeutic treatment. Until now, only minimal change, improvement! P. can therefore experiment with a singing bowl (universal bowl) every day. Before executing his writing exercises (assignments), an adult taps a singing bowl for approx. 3 minutes. We are now watching to see if and how his writing will change.

P. likes to hold the bowl, he gets excited every time and then returns to his dreaded writing exercises more motivated.«

The last question of the overall evaluation focuses on the desire by the participants to continue working with the »sound break«. Here, the results are almost overwhelming: despite very varied school situations and workloads during the trial study, **all(!)** participants wish to continue working with the »sound break«.

To the question »Do you want to continue implementing the sound break after completion of the study?« (multiple answers possible), the following responses were provided: 7 mentions of regularly, 4 always, 6 depending on the situation. As an example, we quote a concluding statement of one of the teachers:

»For me personally, I cannot imagine teaching without the singing bowls anymore. They have become an integral part that I would like to expand further. I am therefore already looking forward to the training in spring. I want to become knowledgeable in this area to implement this wonderful material even more effectively and more intensively.«

4. Future outlook and bottom line

The most important result for our group is the decision to plan another study for the fall of 2010. This study will be designed to focus on the following: the special needs of children in kindergarten, elementary school, and high school, which was only represented with one class in the current study. We also plan to put more emphasis on the effect the »sound break« has on nursery and school teachers. Current results indicate that nursery and school teachers experienced the »sound break« as helpful for themselves. Incorporation of parents into the project through targeted information will also receive more emphasis. Our current project provided interesting starting points for this: parents were in part very interested and inquired about possible application of singing bowls at home – especially to facilitate homework. Approx. 16 parents decided to acquire a singing bowl during the project, in many cases, because children asked for singing bowls for Christmas.

With regard to the positive reaction by parents to the singing bowls, one teacher writes:

»Two parents wanted to know specifically how their child responded to the sound break. They had already heard about sound therapy outside of school and are particularly interested in it. They are thinking about buying a singing bowl for their child so they can 'work' with it at home.«

Based on the results to date of this initial evaluation and discussions with nursery and school teachers, we are convinced of the following: the »sound break« can be successfully implemented in both a kindergarten as well as a school setting. We have distinct indications that even with just a brief implementation of singing bowls (2 – 5 minutes) stress can be reduced and relaxation increased, facilitating the learning process.



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