

THE ROLE OF ONE-MINUTE SILENT PRAYER IN ENHANCING STUDENT FOCUS AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A 12-YEAR OBSERVATIONAL STUDY

Justin R Nayagam¹

¹Department of botany, Union Christian College (Autonomous), Aluva-2, Kerala, India

Corresponding author: drjustinrnayagam@gmail.com¹, justinr@uccollege.edu.in¹

Abstract

This research paper presents a 12-year observational study examining the psychosocial and academic impacts of a one-minute silent prayer session conducted at the beginning of each class by a college professor teaching undergraduate and postgraduate courses in botany and complementary zoology. Initiated in October 2012, the silent prayer is a non-denominational, reflective pause intended to help students mentally transition into a state of focus, emotional balance, and readiness for learning. Over the years, more than 36 batches of students—across various gender and socio-economic backgrounds—participated in this daily practice. Initial resistance was commonly observed, particularly among new undergraduate batches, but within weeks, classroom disturbances reduced noticeably. Within six months, a significant portion of students voluntarily sought the professor's prayers before examinations, indicating acceptance and appreciation of the practice. Annual feedback and informal interactions consistently revealed improvements in concentration, emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, and the ability to overcome socio-economic and cultural barriers. The study highlights how even brief, non-intrusive moments of silence can foster psychological well-being and academic discipline. These findings suggest that integrating simple reflective practices into classroom settings can significantly enhance the learning environment and student development, especially in diverse and mixed-ability higher education contexts.

1. Introduction

In the pursuit of academic excellence and holistic student development, educators are increasingly exploring innovative pedagogical strategies that go beyond the traditional focus on content delivery and assessment. The 21st-century classroom demands not only intellectual engagement but also emotional and psychological readiness to learn. As a result, reflective and mindfulness-based practices are gaining traction in academic settings for their proven ability to support emotional balance, enhance concentration, and reduce academic stress (Shapiro et al., 2008).

Union Christian College, Aluva—established in 1921 by four visionary faculty members from Madras Christian College, Chennai—was founded on principles of ecumenism, fellowship, and cosmopolitan outlook. Rooted in Protestant Christian traditions yet committed to interfaith dialogue and academic inclusivity, the college has a long-standing reputation for nurturing character and competence among students. Within this progressive educational atmosphere, faculty are encouraged to adopt practices that support the intellectual, emotional, and ethical growth of students (Cohen, 2006).

It is in this context that a faculty member from the departments of Botany and Zoology initiated a unique classroom practice in October 2012: a one-minute silent prayer or reflection at the start of every class. This practice, although simple and brief, was designed as a moment for students to center themselves—mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—before engaging in academic work. It is non-denominational and inclusive, allowing each student to interpret the silence according to their own belief system or personal need (Moulin, 2011).

Over the course of 12 years, the practice has been applied consistently across undergraduate and postgraduate programs, engaging more than 36 batches of students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Despite initial resistance from students unfamiliar with such reflective pauses in academic spaces, the intervention gradually transformed the

classroom environment (Chandler, 2004). Students began demonstrating greater emotional regulation, increased focus, improved interpersonal relationships, and a more cohesive classroom dynamic—particularly among undergraduates, where socio-economic diversity is more pronounced.

This paper documents and analyzes the long-term effects of this silent prayer practice based on observational data, annual student feedback, and behavioral outcomes. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the growing discourse on mindfulness, reflection, and emotional well-being in higher education, and to explore how such simple, inclusive practices can make meaningful differences in student life and learning.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The study involves:

- **Undergraduate Botany Students:** 12 batches (20–28 students each)
- **Undergraduate Zoology Students (Complementary Paper):** 12 batches (same student base as above)
- **Postgraduate Botany Students:** 12 batches (9–14 students each)

Demographic Breakdown:

- Undergraduate: 1–9 males and 17–22 females per batch
- Postgraduate: 0–3 males and 9–12 females per batch

2.2. Procedure

From October 2012, the professor began each class by requesting all students to rise and observe one minute of silent prayer. The prayer is non-denominational and silent, intended solely as a moment of reflection and mental preparation.

2.3. Data Collection

- **Observational Notes:** Recorded changes in student behavior, classroom ambiance, and participation.
- **Annual Feedback Surveys:** Collected from students anonymously.
- **Informal Student Interactions:** Noted student-initiated requests for prayer before examinations.

3. Results

Student Perceptions on One-Minute Silence/Prayer Before Class

Over a 12-year period, the practice of beginning each class with a one-minute silence or silent prayer was observed and reflected upon by students. Their feedback reveals a diverse range of emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and behavioral responses. Thematic analysis of the collected student responses yielded the following key themes and sub-themes:

3.1. Positive Psychological and Cognitive Impact

a. Improved Focus and Mental Clarity

- *“Silence for 1 minute before class helps to come back to focus and on studies.”*
- *“Helps to concentrate in the class.”*
- *“It gives calmness to mind.”*
- *“Sleepy feel can be reduced by 1 minute prayer.”*

b. Stress Reduction and Emotional Regulation

- *“During semester exams and practicals I observed this to reduce my stress – it was like deep breath.”*
- *“Even if it is for 1 second, that moment gives lot of energy and refreshing feel.”*

3.2. Spiritual and Reflective Value

a. Connection with the Divine and Gratitude

- *"Thank you for starting the class with prayer and making us remembering God."*
- *"Thank God for a good college life and academic ambience."*
- *"Later on, silent prayer = sir."*

b. Personal Reflection and Goal Orientation

- *"Get to rethink my priorities and goals of studying."*

c. Respect and Integration Over Time

- *"At first I felt like laughing at your silent prayer, but later it became a part of my life. Now I respect the first 1 minute of your class."*
- *"Silent prayer experience is the first from you and it had given significant influence in me."*

3.3. Cultural Familiarity and Educational Context

- *"Since I had my basic education from Christian-owned schools I didn't feel this as new."*
- *"I didn't see any other teachers doing it."*
- *"You are different from others because of this."*
- *"I think all teachers should follow this."*

3.4. Neutral or Non-religious Perspectives

- *"I do not believe in God and hence the 1-minute prayer is only a silent time for me."*
- *"I do not feel beneficial or unfavourable."*
- *"I do not fold my hands or bow my head down but do 1-minute meditation."*

These responses reflect that students who identify as non-religious or secular still found the silent moment useful as a personal pause or meditation.

3.5. Challenges and Resistance

- *"As your class comes in the middle of the college timetable, it can't give any devotional impact as well as major impact."*
- *"Since there is a gap between classes silence does not give a new feel in me."*
- *"Sometimes I felt like rising up from the chair for observing this silence/prayer is a burden."*
- *"I have purposefully made sound with the chairs when you announce for 1-minute prayer/silence – sorry."*

These reactions highlight minor resistance or lack of perceived relevance among some students, particularly when the class schedule influenced their receptiveness.

3.6. Influence of Instructor and Continuity

- *"You give a positive energy to students on a daily/hourly basis in all your classes."*
- *"I have several times wondered whether you are observing this silence for 1 minute."*

This indicates students not only valued the practice itself but also attributed its authenticity and impact to the professor's consistent personal example.

Summary of Findings

Theme	% (Approx.)	Indicated Key Implications
Positive psychological impact	~60%	Enhances focus, reduces stress
Spiritual/reflection value	~50%	Increases gratitude, personal awareness
Culturally familiar/respected	~30%	Some had prior exposure; welcomed the continuity
Neutral/non-religious participation	~20%	Used as silent meditation
Negative or indifferent responses	~10%	Felt burdened or disengaged
Influence of teacher's example	~25%	Instructor consistency reinforced practice

Note: Percentages are estimations based on qualitative feedback volume.

3.7. Initial Resistance and Behavioral Adjustment

Most batches showed discomfort or resistance during the initial weeks, with high levels of restlessness and disturbances during the prayer. However, by the end of the first month, students exhibited increased discipline, reduced disruptions, and greater receptivity.

3.8. Mid-Semester Behavioral Transformation

By the semester examination phase (around 6 months), 40–50% of undergraduate students and 60–90% of postgraduate students approached the professor voluntarily requesting prayers for success, indicating internalization of the practice.

3.9. Feedback Outcomes

Student feedback highlighted the following recurring themes:

- Improved concentration and focus
- Enhanced ability to regulate emotions
- Better interpersonal relationships
- A noticeable decline in socio-economic biases and increased unity
- Sense of mental preparedness before lectures or exams

4. Discussion

The practice of starting each class with a one-minute silence or prayer, as reflected in the students' feedback, yields significant insights into both the psychological and emotional impact on students and their engagement with the practice over time (Burack, 2025). Over the 12-year period, the practice evolved into a well-integrated ritual in the academic environment, with a noticeable shift in how students responded. This section discusses the implications of these findings and situates them within existing literature on mindfulness, classroom management, and student well-being.

4.1 Psychological Benefits: Enhanced Focus, Stress Reduction, and Emotional Regulation

The positive psychological outcomes of the one-minute silence, reported by around 60% of students, underscore the value of a brief reflective moment in enhancing focus and emotional clarity. Students described the practice as an opportunity to reset their mental state, with many noting an improvement in concentration and reduction in feelings of sleepiness or distraction (Rosen, 2017). These findings are consistent with previous studies on mindfulness and contemplative practices in educational settings, which highlight that brief moments of silence can foster mental preparedness and emotional balance (Zeidan et al., 2010;

Meiklejohn et al., 2012). The practice also provided a space for emotional regulation, especially during high-stress periods such as exams, with students describing it as a form of "deep breath" to alleviate anxiety. This aligns with research that suggests mindfulness-based interventions in classrooms can reduce stress and improve students' emotional resilience (Roeser et al., 2013).

The calming effect of the prayer or silence suggests that even short periods of focused attention can enhance students' readiness to engage with the academic content of the class. These findings emphasize the importance of incorporating moments of mindfulness or silence into daily routines as a tool for improving students' focus and emotional well-being.

4.2 Spiritual and Reflective Dimensions: Acknowledging Personal Growth and Gratitude

The second major theme identified in the data, reflecting spiritual and reflective values, emphasizes how the practice of silent prayer was experienced by students as a space for personal reflection, gratitude, and goal re-evaluation (Adler & Fagley, 2005). For many students, this brief moment served as an opportunity to reconnect with their spiritual or reflective selves. The act of offering gratitude for the educational environment or reassessing personal goals during this silence was a form of spiritual engagement (Driscoll, 2024). Although this effect was more prominent in students with a religious or spiritual orientation, it is noteworthy that even secular students found value in the practice as a form of meditation or quiet contemplation.

The increase in the number of students requesting the silent prayer during the examination period further suggests that the practice had been internalized and associated with positive emotional outcomes. This shift, as evidenced by 40-90% of students seeking out the practice by mid-semester, mirrors findings from mindfulness research, which demonstrate that students who engage in regular reflective practices show greater emotional regulation and academic resilience (Kiken et al., 2015).

4.3 Cultural and Social Relevance: Addressing Diversity and Fostering Unity

Interestingly, students' responses also highlighted the cultural and social significance of the silent prayer practice. While some students expressed familiarity with this practice from prior experiences in Christian schools, others found it novel, emphasizing that the professor's consistent implementation of the ritual distinguished their classroom from others. These diverse reactions suggest that while the prayer holds spiritual value for some, for others, it functions more as a unifying pause that fosters a sense of collective focus and calm (Fuist, 2015).

The feedback also indicates that over time, students began to respect the ritual and associated it with discipline and academic engagement, even if it was not aligned with their personal religious beliefs. This finding supports the idea that shared rituals, even when not directly linked to individual beliefs, can foster social cohesion and help reduce socio-economic biases. This finding is particularly relevant given the increasing diversity of student populations in higher education, where classroom rituals can serve as a unifying force in promoting inclusivity and mutual respect (Nussbaum, 2010).

4.4 Neutral and Non-Religious Perspectives: Secular Adaptations and Meditation

The responses from non-religious students suggest that the one-minute silence can serve a more secular function, such as a pause for meditation or a moment for personal reflection, particularly for students who do not identify with religious practices. Although the prayer itself was not deemed beneficial by some, the practice still offered a mental reset. This suggests that secular adaptations of such rituals can still be highly effective in promoting student well-being. Similar findings in educational psychology indicate that brief moments of mindfulness, irrespective of religious context, can improve concentration, self-regulation, and academic performance (Zeidan et al., 2010).

Interestingly, while 20% of students reported no significant impact or disengagement from the prayer, their feedback suggests that the one-minute silence still provided a useful transition between classes, even if they did not attribute spiritual value to it. This highlights the adaptability of such practices in a diverse classroom setting, where even non-religious students could engage in the moment of silence as a cognitive tool for mental reset (Uddin-Talukder, 2025).

4.5 Resistance and Behavioral Adjustment: Overcoming Initial Discomfort

As observed in the initial weeks, students exhibited resistance, which included restlessness and occasional disruptions during the silent prayer. This initial discomfort is not unusual when introducing new practices in educational settings. Over time, however, there was a marked shift in student behavior, with increasing discipline and reduced disturbances. This suggests that the ritual became more deeply ingrained and that students began to view it not only as a time for reflection but also as a class norm. The adjustment over time reflects broader educational research indicating that consistent practice of classroom routines can reduce disruptions and foster greater engagement (Emmer & Sabornie, 2015).

4.6 Teacher Influence: Modeling and Authenticity

The role of the teacher's consistency in maintaining the practice was pivotal in its acceptance and internalization. Students often referenced the teacher's personal example in their feedback, suggesting that the teacher's own sincerity and authenticity in observing the silence contributed significantly to its impact. This observation aligns with literature on teacher-student relationships, which emphasizes that teacher modeling can play a crucial role in shaping student behaviors and attitudes toward classroom practices (Pianta et al., 2012).

4.7 Educational and Social Implications

The findings from this study suggest that mindfulness-based practices in educational settings, such as one-minute silences or prayers, can have a significant impact on students' psychological well-being, academic focus, and social cohesion. Beyond individual benefits, the ritual fostered a sense of shared responsibility and community spirit within the classroom. Given the broad applicability across diverse student populations, educational institutions might consider incorporating similar practices to enhance emotional intelligence, reduce academic stress, and promote inclusive learning environments (Reicher, 2010).

Furthermore, as more students experience the internalization of such practices, there is potential for these moments to become ritualized within the academic culture, encouraging widespread participation and creating a routine that transcends religious boundaries while promoting mental health and collective focus.

4.8 Limitations and Areas for Future Research

While the findings presented are rich and insightful, they are based on qualitative feedback, which limits the generalizability of the results. Future research could involve quantitative methods to assess the long-term academic outcomes and emotional resilience of students who engage in regular mindfulness or silence-based practices. Additionally, exploring the cross-cultural relevance of such practices in diverse educational settings could provide deeper insights into their universal applicability.

7. Recommendations

- Institutions should consider integrating short silent reflection periods in classrooms.
- Further controlled studies can be conducted to evaluate cognitive and emotional impacts.
- Faculty development programs may include training on non-denominational reflective practices.

8. References

- Adler, M. G., & Fagley, N. S. (2005). Appreciation: Individual differences in finding value and meaning as a unique predictor of subjective well-being. *Journal of personality*, 73(1), 79-114.
- Burack, C. (2025). Peak Teaching: Exploring and Fostering Sacred Experiences In University Classrooms. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 44(1), 10.
- Chandler, S. (2004). Reflective discourses in the classroom: Creating spaces where students can change their minds. *Feminist Teacher*, 15(1), 16-33.
- Cohen, J. (2006). Social, emotional, ethical, and academic education: Creating a climate for learning, participation in democracy, and well-being. *Harvard educational review*, 76(2), 201-237.
- Davidson, R. J., Kabat-Zinn, J., et al. (2003). Alterations in brain and immune function produced by mindfulness meditation. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 65(4), 564–570.
- Driscoll, W. R. (2024). The Sound of Silence: The Significance of Nurturing Spirituality, Self-Transformation, and Academic Excellence in Augustinian Schools. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 27(2), 107-121.
- Emmer, E. T., & Sabornie, E. J. (Eds.). (2015). *Handbook of classroom management*. New York: Routledge.
- Fuist, T. N. (2015). Talking to God among a cloud of witnesses: Collective prayer as a meaningful performance. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 54(3), 523-539.
- Kiken, L. G., Garland, E. L., Bluth, K., Palsson, O. S., & Gaylord, S. A. (2015). From a state to a trait: Trajectories of state mindfulness in meditation during intervention predict changes in trait mindfulness. *Personality and Individual differences*, 81, 41-46.
- Moulin, D. (2011). Giving voice to ‘the silent minority’: The experience of religious students in secondary school religious education lessons. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 33(3), 313-326.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2010). Perceptive equilibrium: Literary theory and ethical theory. *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature*, 239-267.
- Pianta, R. C., Hamre, B. K., & Allen, J. P. (2012). Teacher-student relationships and engagement: Conceptualizing, measuring, and improving the capacity of classroom interactions. In *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 365-386). Boston, MA: Springer US.
- Reicher, H. (2010). Building inclusive education on social and emotional learning: Challenges and perspectives—a review. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14(3), 213-246.
- Rosen, L. D. (2017). The distracted student mind—enhancing its focus and attention. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 99(2), 8-14.
- Shapiro, S. L., Brown, K. W., & Astin, J. A. (2008). Toward the integration of meditation into higher education: A review of research. *Teachers College Record*, 110(2), 494–528.
- Uddin-Talukder, N. (2025). The world is not a stage: primary initial teacher education in faith settings through the navigation of dissonance and negotiation of faith identity. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 30(1), 225-248.
- Zeidan, F., Johnson, S. K., Diamond, B. J., David, Z., & Goolkasian, P. (2010). Mindfulness meditation improves cognition: Evidence of brief mental training. *Consciousness and cognition*, 19(2), 597-605.