After the Blackbird Whistles: Listening to Silence in Classrooms

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Background/Context: Students spend a large part of their time in schools in silence. However, teachers tend to spend most of their time attending to student talk. Anthropological and linguistic research has contributed to an understanding of silence in particular communities, offering explanations for students’ silence in school. This research raised questions about the silence of marginalized groups of students in classrooms, highlighting teachers’ role in this silencing and drawing on limited meanings of silence. More recently, research on silence has conceptualized silence as a part of a continuum.

Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study: The purpose of this project was to review existing literature and draw on two longitudinal research studies to understand the functions and uses of silence in everyday classroom practice. I explore the question, How might paying attention to the productivity of student silence and the possibilities it contains add to our understanding of student silence in educational settings? Silence holds multiple meanings for individuals within and across racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. However, in schools, silence is often assigned a limited number of meanings. This article seeks to add to educators’ and researchers’ tools for interpreting classroom silence.

Research Design: The article is based on two longitudinal qualitative studies. The first was an ethnographic study of the literacy practices of high school students in a multiracial high school on the West Coast. This study was designed with the goal of learning about adolescents’ literacy practices in and out of school during their final year of high school and in their first few years as high school graduates. The second study documents discourses of race and race relations in a postdesegregated middle school. The goal of this 3-year study was to gather the missing student perspectives on their racialized experiences in school during the desegregation time period.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Understanding the role of silence for the individual and the class as a whole is a complex process that may require new ways of conceptualizing listening. I conclude that an understanding of the meanings of silence through the practice of
careful listening and inquiry shifts a teacher’s practice and changes a teacher’s understanding of students’ participation. I suggest that teachers redefine participation in classrooms to include silence.

In his poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” Wallace Stevens (1923) wrote:

I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes,  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after.

In classrooms, how often do educators pay attention to both talk and silence—the blackbird’s whistle and the silence that follows? Although poets and novelists have written extensively about silence, the silence of students in classrooms has rarely been examined (for exceptions, see Gilmore, 1985; Li, 2004; Schultz, 2003; and Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004). For the most part, the focus of educational research has been on the silencing of students (e.g., Fine, 1991) and on particular groups of silent students, such as American Indian students and Chinese American girls. How might paying attention to the productivity of student silence and the possibilities it contains add to our understanding of student silence in educational settings? Silence holds multiple meanings for individuals within and across racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. However, in schools, silence is often assigned a limited number of meanings. Students who practice silence are often thought of either as “good” (compliant) or “bad” (resistant or stupid), and their uses of silence are rarely thought of as intentional.

Students spend a large part of their time in schools in silence. Most often, that silence is imposed: Teachers insist on silence when they speak to the whole class and when students are assigned to work alone. In these moments, silence represents order and compliance. At other times, a class may be silent even when a teacher desires verbal participation. In these moments, teachers often interpret the students’ silence as a lack of attention, interest, or knowledge. Many teachers ignore silence or try to replace it with talk without taking the time to understand its range of meanings and consequences. A teacher’s focus is more frequently on what is said rather than the words and meanings that are actively omitted, withheld, carefully guarded, and silenced. I argue for a conception of silence that situates the production of silence in the classroom commu-
nity rather than locating it in the individual. I suggest that teachers explore the meanings of silence in their classrooms through the practice of careful listening and inquiry. In classrooms, silence occurs through interactions between and among students and teachers in response to widely circulating and locally produced discourses, or ways of speaking and acting that reflect certain beliefs and identities (Gee, 1996; Wortham, 2006).

The article begins with an exploration of what it means to include listening to silence as a critical pedagogical practice. I suggest that listening is an essential aspect of teaching and elaborate what listening to silence in teaching entails. Next, I describe many of the possible meanings of silence in classrooms, drawing on existing research and theoretical understandings of silence. The article explores in depth two of the many possible meanings of silence in classrooms: silence as a sign of power, and silence as a form of protection. First, I suggest that silence can signal an assertion of power. The person who speaks last after a period of refraining from speech is often listened to more closely than the student who talks incessantly. Her silence might draw attention to the meaning of her words. Second, silence can be used as a form of protection. Students’ silence allows them to hold onto practices and beliefs that might make them vulnerable to their peers and teachers. Researchers and educators generally focus on student talk; I urge them to listen as well to student silence through an understanding of its many possible meanings. Finally, I conclude by urging teachers to take an inquiry stance toward understanding the silence in their classrooms, exploring its meanings with their students.

DEFINING LISTENING TO SILENCE

To build a pedagogy that is respectful and engages students in learning, I suggest that teachers listen deeply to students, locating the knowledge they gain about the students at the center of teaching (Schultz, 2003). Listening to silence in classrooms involves listening to what is said between and beyond words through a stance of questioning and not knowing. This includes understanding how and when children (and adults) might choose to remain silent and how they communicate through gestures and various media. Listening to silence includes listening to students who seem silent—students who are often overlooked and dominated by their classmates who may be louder and more actively demand their teacher’s attention. Further, listening to silence in a classroom includes paying attention to why, how, and when a person chooses not to speak or participate in a conversation.
When a teacher listens to silence, she observes the various roles a student takes in a classroom, which might include the role of silent observer and participant. Listening to silence also means attending to the way a person asserts power by not speaking as well as a contribution made through spoken words. Teachers can listen to silence through posing a question rather than rendering a judgment. They can interrogate why a student is silent, rather than assuming that the silence signals resistance, lack of interest, disengagement, or incompetence. Listening to silence can mean holding open the many possible reasons for that silence and seeing the silence as located in the community interactions rather than the individual.

I distinguish listening or attending to silence from paying attention to acts of silencing. Silence is often conceptualized as a condition derived from the silencing of students through institutional norms, texts, and interactions. Indeed, there are silencing acts and structures that enforce silence among certain individuals; silent students are usually thought of as disempowered by their silence. For instance, students of color, gay or lesbian students, and students with (dis)abilities are often thought of as silenced rather than silent by choice. Many people located in these categories also refuse to take on the silent stance they are assumed to occupy, their refusal raising questions about how these kinds of categorizations shape social life. Without dismissing the idea that many students are silenced in classrooms, I argue that it is important to look beyond silencing to the silence itself. My exploration focuses on how teachers can listen to silence in the classroom in order to hear all students and the meanings conveyed by their silence as well as their talk. In listening to silence, I suggest that teachers attend to how students might choose silence rather than how they are victims of silencing moves by teachers and institutions.

EXPLORING THE MEANINGS OF CLASSROOM SILENCE

Silence . . . is powerful. It is the dimension in which ordinary and extraordinary events take their proper places. In the Indian world, a word is spoken or a song is sung not against, but within the silence. In the telling of a story, there are silences in which words are anticipated or held on to, heard to echo in the still depths of the imagination. In the oral tradition, silence is the sanctuary of sound. Words are wholly alive in the hold of silence; they are sacred. (Momaday, 1997, p. 16)

In contrast to an understanding of silence as an empty space or a void, I
emphasize the importance of paying attention to the various possible meanings of student silence. Silence marks the boundaries of words and thought. Silence contains sound, and talk always contains silences. For a teacher, student silences can have a range of meanings: silence might signal that a student is engaged in individual work, and, alternatively, it might indicate student lack of interest, boredom, and even hostility. Silence is often thought to indicate shyness, powerlessness, and fear, but rarely the choice not to speak. When understood as the refusal to speak, silence is often assumed to be a passive move of opposition or hostility rather than an act of participation. A teacher might interpret a student’s silence as lack of preparation or knowledge, or even as ignorance.

Anthropological and linguistic research has contributed to an understanding of silence in particular communities, offering explanations for students’ silence in school (e.g., Gilmore, 1985; Philips, 1983; Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985). This research raised questions about the silence of marginalized groups of students in classrooms, highlighting teachers’ role in this silencing and drawing on limited meanings of silence. As a result, there was a focus on creating participation structures that are inclusive of students, providing opportunities for talk and interaction (e.g., Au & Mason, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Philips). Often these participation structures were designed with certain groups in mind (e.g., American Indians) so that classrooms could become more culturally responsive. The intent was to set up classrooms that were respectful, building on students’ strengths rather than the remediation of perceived deficits that students brought from their home communities. Most often, the goal was to increase talk. The implication was that the talk in a classroom is a proxy for learning.

Although limited in its scope, this research laid an initial foundation for studying silence. At the same time, it does not emphasize the potentially productive uses of silence, nor the ways in which students sometimes actively choose to enact this stance. Understanding different forms of participation practiced by individuals and by students as a group allows us to recognize a wider range of student engagement. For instance, knowledge of the conventions of participation among Navajos may help a teacher to understand a Navajo student’s silences as respectful and a decision not to put oneself in front of others. Yet, the assumption that all Navajos participate through silence keeps us from recognizing the particular modes of participation enacted by individual Navajo students. It is critical for teachers to be aware of group characteristics while paying attention to the ways in which individuals make decisions within particular contexts and at specific times (Pollock, 2004, 2008; Schultz, 2008). In addition, these characteristics constantly shift as they are culturally made
and remade over time and in varied contexts.

Silence and speech can also be thought of as part of a continuum (Li, 2004). Our attention is often drawn to the talk. What does it mean to pay attention to the silence? In her study of student silence, Li identified several different kinds of silence, suggesting that silence is a “complex and complicated cultural phenomenon” (p. 69). If educators want to teach all students in their classrooms, they must learn to identify and respond to a range of silences that might reflect cultural understandings (Li). Further, Li suggested that it may be dangerous—or culturally insensitive—to silence silences without understanding their meaning or relationship to the talk in the class (Li; see Schultz, 2008, for a related point). Student silence might be a cause for concern (Burbules, 2004) or simply a statement a teacher needs to learn to read. Acknowledging the complexity of interpreting silence and its range of meanings, I elaborate two possible uses of silence in the classroom—power and protection—in the following sections.

To study silence, I drew on existing literature in many disciplines and two longitudinal studies I describe next. To augment these understandings, I conducted classroom research with graduate students in 10 elementary classrooms over 2 years. As I analyzed the classroom data and explored the research and writing on silence, my focus shifted from silent individuals to the ways in which silence works in the classroom. I analyzed moments when teachers insisted on silence—on the part of individual students or entire classrooms. I tried to identify the kinds of silences that teachers encounter and use in their classrooms, and the range of responses to those silences. When teachers express frustration with silent students, they often fail to recognize how silence might be connected more broadly to a larger set of interactions in the classroom that have their own sociopolitical history. As I turned my attention to the interactions, I realized that I needed to look at talk and silence together. In the next two sections, I elaborate two of the reoccurring patterns identified in the data.

LISTENING TO STUDENTS’ USES OF SILENCE AS A SIGN OF POWER

Although it is important to listen and attend to the silencing of students, it is also critical to listen to and understand how a student might enact power in the classroom through silence. A student who appears silent in classrooms is frequently represented as someone who is powerless and compliant; ironically, she may also be portrayed as resistant—as a person who holds onto her silence in protest to the teacher’s power and institutional silencing. The following scene, drawn from a longitudinal study of
the literacy practices of high school students in a multiracial high school on the West Coast, illustrates a student’s use of silence to enact a powerful stance in his classroom. This study was designed with the goal of learning about adolescents’ literacy practices in and out of school during their final year of high school and in their first few years as high school graduates (Schultz, 2003). Although I began this study by listening to students’ talk and examining their writing, I soon became aware of the role that silence played in students’ participation in classroom discussions, as described in the brief vignette that follows.

Luis, who considered himself Mexican American, sat in the back of his high school government class. On this particular day, many students joined the class discussion, speaking loudly and rapidly about J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI. Vying for the floor, their voices spilled over each other. His notebook open, his head down, Luis had remained silent during class for weeks on end. It was not until the final days of the first semester that he uttered his first statement to the whole group. Luis delivered a powerful indictment against the growing consensus in the class. He reminded everyone—including the teacher—of the film they recently viewed, which revealed Hoover’s antigay stance. In a rare moment of quiet, his classmates listened carefully to his words. His statement changed the course of the conversation, which regained its momentum when he finished speaking. (Schultz, 2008, 2009)

We typically understand words as powerful. Arguments are more frequently won through the force of words, rather than the power of silence. Yet there is also power in a student’s silence that might go unrecognized or unheard in a classroom. When words are surrounded by silence, they can garner attention. It was the silence that preceded the talk that caused Luis’s peers to attend carefully to his statement.

Luis’s stance toward school was to do the minimal amount of work needed to graduate. He seemed to separate his work in school from the writing and talk that mattered most to him. On occasion, Luis would become intensely engaged in classroom discussions, dropping his typical stance of aloofness. In those instances, as in the one just described, his classmates would pay attention to his well-articulated position. Luis’s silence caused teachers and peers to listen more closely to his words. His timing suggests that he may have been aware of the power of his statement along with the power of his silence, leading his classmates and teacher to take notice. By paying attention to and interrogating the
meanings of his silence and the power it represented, teachers might better understand his talk and find ways to engage him in schooling.

Luis was not asked by his teacher to explain his silence. Until he spoke up at the conclusion of this conversation, the power that resided in his choice to remain silent was not apparent. Rather than simply framing his participation as disengagement or resistance, I suggest that he was often both disengaged and engaged in discussions, his pattern of silence and talk mirroring these choices. At times, he resisted school. Other times, his statements seemed carefully timed and garnered attention through their content and through the rhythm of talk and silence they contained. To some extent, all students display these patterns of engagement and disengagement; however, some students are labeled “silent” or “resistant” because they fit into existing categories. These socially constructed categories obscure the shifting patterns of engagement and disengagement in daily classroom life.

There are multiple ways to understand Luis’s silence. His silence might be understood as a powerful move: By surrounding his single comment with silence, he drew the attention of his classmates and teachers to his provocative statement. Out of silence came a powerful discourse, disrupting the stasis that had been established in the class. This example raises several questions, such as: When do (and should) we interpret silence as a reflection of social dynamics, and when can (and should) we understand silence as an individual choice about whether to participate in learning? Further, when do we accept silence as a form of participation, and when do we push students to speak so that their voices are heard? How does our attention (and lack of attention) to silence highlight and even mask the interactional and power dynamics of our classrooms, and how can we use that silence to prompt conversations about how and when students choose to participate through both talk and silence?

LISTENING TO STUDENTS’ USES OF SILENCE AS A FORM OF PROTECTION

Middle schools in the United States are filled with boisterous, lanky students who engage each other and their teachers in verbal sparring. For the most part, it is a time of trying out identities, asserting strongly held opinions, rebelling against adult-imposed rules, forming and breaking friendships, and, for some students, retreating into silence. Some middle school teachers have loud classrooms bursting with activity as students debate their perspectives or work to solve problems. The loud activity is frequently punctuated by the imposition of silence so that the teacher can reclaim order. Other classrooms are filled with bored, sleeping
students gazing at the clock and waiting for the period to end. In each of these contexts, the students who speak the loudest are often those who are heard. They are the class leaders and the people who command attention from their teachers and peers. Students who are silent often remain unrecognized and invisible; the reasons for their silence are often unknown by their teachers or peers. Frequently, students are silent out of a need or desire to protect themselves. They may wish to remain unknown to their teachers or classmates. They may not trust that others want to invest in the time or effort to know them.

I offer three examples of student silence drawn from a study of a desegregated middle school (e.g., Schultz, 2003) that demonstrate a range of ways students use silence as a form of protection as they negotiate their school experience. In each instance, the highlighted student is a person of color who made decisions—consciously or not—about how to navigate through a majority-White school. Each student used silence as a form of protection. Margaret, an African American student, used silence to hold onto her academic identity. Unable to find a peer group of successful students among her Black or White peers, she chose silence as a way to hide her decision to work hard in school. In contrast, Caroline, a student from a mixed heritage, was an outspoken student who chose silence to fit into her peer group. Afraid that she might be rejected for her beliefs, she used silence to gain acceptance. Zakiya, an African American student, chose silence to guard the details of her family life from her teachers and classmates. Her silence allowed her to protect herself from their possible judgment. At some point during middle school, each of these students chose to participate in classroom life through silence.

MARGARET: USING SILENCE TO HIDE ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

Margaret lived in a well-maintained row home in the city with her mother and two sisters. In her middle school, Margaret was the highest achieving African American student in her grade and one of the highest achieving students in the middle school as a whole. She was frequently the sole African American student, or one of a very few, in her honors classes. She claimed to have decided early in her school career to work hard in school.

Despite her academic accomplishments, Margaret was not well known by many students. For the most part, she worked quietly in the classroom, and her silence was unbroken by either her teacher or her peers. She was cut off from her White peers who did not understand her silence or empathize with her isolation as one of the few Black students in each of her classes. Margaret was also disconnected from the majority of her
Black peers. She claimed that she needed to turn away from them in exchange for academic success. In a school where most of the African American students opted out of academic pursuits, Margaret was willing to face alienation, loneliness, and invisibility to hold onto her desire to achieve in school. She had to struggle daily to disassociate herself from the negative images of urban Black students held by many of the faculty members in the school.

In contrast to the highly visible White middle-class girls and her more vocal Black peers, Margaret was practically invisible. Her academic success, which required her to step outside of the practices enacted by her African American peers, was barely recognized. She actively chose silence to protect her identity as a high-achieving African American in this predominantly White school. Silent and invisible, she could do well in school without being noticed (Schultz, 2003).

CAROLINE: CHOOSING TO SILENCE CRITIQUE

Caroline, who identified alternatively as “American” and “half Japanese and half American,” was a successful student at the middle school by traditional standards. She was a high-achieving student in her honors classes and participated in a number of extracurricular activities, including athletics, the school newspaper, and the Honor Society. For the most part, she took a different stance from most of her peers, who were reluctant to deviate from the norm and chose to conform to the standards set by the popular group. She spoke out against school practices in class discussions and in a column she wrote for the school newspaper, where she articulated strong positions on unpopular but relatively safe issues. Confident in her voice, Caroline condemned the racism, sexism, and elitism of her peers. She considered herself a feminist and spoke frequently about her need to defend these views to her classmates. In our interviews, she consistently returned to her conclusion that her peers held narrow views and were afraid to speak up if they disagreed (Schultz, 2003).

Although Caroline was proud of her position as a leader in class discussions, she struggled to balance her desire to be popular with her refusal to take a silent stance. At a school where most students, teachers, and parents professed to get along with one another, neither her teachers nor her peers felt comfortable with Caroline’s strong and articulate positions that raised questions and critique. For a period of time in eighth grade when she dated a popular boy, Caroline became less outspoken and took on a stance of silence. She consciously traded her outspokenness for popularity. Caroline used silence to protect herself from the judgment of her peers. She took on a new identity—as a quiet girl—to gain access to and
acceptance in a new peer group. As she looked toward high school, she
told us that she had decided to retain this stance in order to be accepted
by more students. Aware of what she might lose, Caroline protected her
position in the social hierarchy by consciously muting her voice.

Students (and indeed adults) might choose silence to gain access to dif-
ferent groups of people. At times, Caroline chose to hide her views and
enact a silent stance to gain access, at least for a short period, to her
peers. This stance allowed her to protect herself from their critique and
enact an identity as an acceptable girl in this particular classroom com-

ZAKIYA: USING SILENCE TO SAFEGUARD SECRETS

A large African American girl, Zakiya, was a commanding presence in her
classes. In the middle school, nearly everyone knew her, and many of her
peers from a variety of racial and class backgrounds liked her. Unlike
Margaret, she was not willing to act in an accommodating manner.
Although Zakiya held many of the same critical positions as Caroline, she
alternated between a more openly resistant and combative stance, and a
silent one when she was not invested enough to offer her critique. When
she did not agree with a teacher or a group of students, according to her
teachers, Zakiya was likely to “tell it like it is,” leading them to consider
her adversarial, demanding, and difficult to teach.

Zakiya was talented and had clear goals for herself. She described her-
self as eager to learn, which was exemplified by her extensive reading and
studying about topics that captured her imagination. Although she
appeared to have natural leadership abilities, Zakiya was unsure whether,
in the context of this school, which seemed removed from her daily expe-
riences, she wanted to take on this role.

Like many of her African American peers who lived in the city, Zakiya
often took on demanding responsibilities once she returned home from
school. In addition to her mother, whom she claimed was more of a peer,
there were friends and neighbors, children and older people alike, who
depended on her care. Yet these roles and responsibilities were not well
understood by many of her teachers. One day, a teacher demanded to
know why she was in class without a pencil and notebook. Zakiya replied
that she did not have money that week for a pencil. Her teacher replied,
“Well, go and baby sit then to earn enough money to buy one.” Zakiya
had responsibility for child care nearly every afternoon; like many of her
low-income peers, she was not paid for this work. She answered the
teacher with silence and a scowl. Zakiya was failing her eighth-grade year, and not long afterward dropped out of school. Her mostly White and middle-class teachers and peers knew little about her life at home, her goals, or her aspirations, which she hid through her silence. Zakiya seemed to enact a stance of silence to protect her family and community life that did not seem well understood by her teachers and many of her peers. Her silence helped her to maintain her integrity in a school that often felt alienating.

Listening for silence requires that teachers notice the academic success of students like Margaret, the critique offered by Caroline, and the complexities of negotiating home and school that Zakiya experienced, and that they find ways to create a classroom and school culture that recognizes and values their talents and contributions. Teachers can identify students’ agentive actions through their choices of silence while remaining cognizant of the constraints within which this agency operates. Taking a listening stance toward silence suggests honoring students’ need to be silent to protect themselves, while creating structures that offer students more choices of ways to participate in classrooms. The narrator in Ellison’s (1952) novel *The Invisible Man* asks, “To whom can I be responsible, and why should I be when you refuse to see me? . . . Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement” (p. 16). Listening for silence includes recognizing students’ choice to be silent without allowing them to become invisible. Listening to silence includes providing students with the opportunities to reflect on their positions in the classroom and school with forums to make their stories public while honoring their need to protect aspects of their lives.

Adults and youth alike choose silence to gain access to groups of people who might hold different views or stances on a variety of topics. Listening for silence encompasses noticing the decisions students make, such as Margaret’s choice to use silence to avoid confrontation and to hold on to her academic identity. It includes an awareness of when students like Caroline take critical or risky stands, and supporting them to articulate these positions. Students of color, and girls in particular, are frequently discouraged from displaying their intelligence in school. They often pay a high price in terms of popularity for their academic achievement. As Greene (1993) explained, “There are ways of speaking and telling that construct silences, create “others,” invent gradations of social difference necessary for identification of norms” (p. 216). I would add that there are ways that youth adopt silence to gain access to new worlds and avoid becoming an outsider. Listening to silence means acknowledging the minefields of adolescent relationships and creating possibilities for participation through silence, or communication through other
modalities such as writing (Schultz, 2009). Listening for silence includes creating opportunities for students like Zakiya to go beyond their resistance and alienation to care about learning and to contribute to the collective knowledge of the class. It also takes into account the use of silence to protect and preserve one’s home life in a school setting that might feel threatening.

LISTENING TO THE WAYS STUDENTS INHABIT AND USE SILENCE

Students spend much of their time in silence in most U.S. classrooms. They are expected to be silent when the teacher or a classmate talks or when they are assigned work to complete on their own in their seats. When teachers ask questions, however, they rarely enact what Rowe (1986) and others call “wait time.” In general, the first student to raise his or her hand or the student with the loudest and most insistent voice is the student who gains access to the floor. When classrooms are dominated by a rapid call and response style, students who think quickly and immediately formulate their ideas into articulate responses are often recognized before those who take longer to formulate a response. Second language learners and students who are reflective or take more time to put together a response often lose the opportunity to participate in classroom discussions. This practice, of rewarding those who think and articulate answers quickly, is not beneficial to either group of students because the ideas and perspectives of some participants are lost.

Teachers can interpret the silence of students or a class of students as a lack of knowledge or understanding, or they can listen to what is communicated through the silence. Rather than a failure to understand, silence might indicate the need for more time to reflect or that ideas may be difficult to put into words. Listening to silence suggests that we listen for the limitations of talk rather than ascribing these limitations to the silent individual. Wittengenstein (1961) warned, “There is indeed the inexpressible. . . . Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (quoted in Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004, p. 149). Zembylas and Michaelides added, “There is a futility in making everything into another content of speech; some things are lost in the speaking. It might be argued that this loss is silence itself” (pp. 194–195). Silence can be thought of as containing ideas that cannot be expressed in words. Even the most articulate individuals have the experience of not being able to express an idea through words. We sometimes refer to these ideas as “ineffable.” For some, the inexpressible should remain that way—captured in silence. For others, a goal is to provide opportunities for silence
to emerge into talk and action. Teachers can learn to listen to the multiple connotations of silence, to make spaces for silence and talk, and to acknowledge the critical role silence may play in classroom learning.

CONCLUSION: LISTENING TO SILENCE THROUGH TAKING AN INQUIRY STANCE

Listening to silence is difficult. It is far easier to pay attention to talk and to read or understand a student’s participation through her words. If we think about a student’s silence at all, we usually make assumptions about the student’s compliance or resistance without probing the depths of what that silence might mean for that student at that particular time. Understanding the role of silence for the individual and the class as a whole is a complex process that may require new ways of conceptualizing listening. We speak and listen from silence. Silence permeates classrooms. Students spend more time in silence than in talk. In fact, talk contains silences that may be difficult to listen to or hear. Listening to classroom silences will allow a teacher to learn more about a student and her participation in classroom life.

In order to listen to students’ silences, teachers can develop ways to listen to and hear different kinds of silences and the role that silence plays for the individual and a class of students. This suggests taking an inquiry stance toward silence and participation. For instance, a teacher might have asked students like Luis, Margaret, Caroline, and Zakiya about the meanings and intentions of their silences. This could include a conversation about how this silence positioned a student in relation to his or her classmates. What might it mean when individuals or groups of individuals are silent at certain times and in certain conversations? Teachers can also look for the meanings of interactional silences between and among students and teachers. When are there silences in conversations? Who is silent, and what are the causes? Further, teachers can interrogate what is “sayable” in a classroom. Teachers might invite students themselves to investigate the silences in their classrooms. They might begin by looking at videotapes of other classrooms to learn how to analyze silence to uncover its possible meanings. For instance, a teacher might use the recent French movie, The Class (Entre les Murs, 2008) to help a group of students develop a set of tools and a vocabulary for noticing and talking about silence. This film contains classroom scenes filled with silences that can be interpreted in many different ways. Several other films contain classroom footage that might be useful for this activity. For example, two films, High School (1968) and High School II (1994), both by filmmaker Frederick Wiseman, offer interesting opportunities for this kind of analy-
sis. Once teachers and students develop a vocabulary for discussing the functions and uses of silence in another classroom, they can turn their attention to their own classroom. Documenting silence and interaction through audio- or videotapes provides a common text for such a discussion. Rather than promoting the view that silence is a characteristic of individual “silent students,” teachers can work to develop an understanding of how a classroom community works together to produce silence. Tracing the ways that silence works in a classroom can shift teachers’ and students’ understandings of their roles and responsibilities for teaching and learning.

I suggest that teachers redefine participation in classrooms to include silence, not simply to celebrate silence but to understand how and when silence might constitute a valid and even useful form of participation (Schultz, 2009). At the same time, teachers must determine when silence needs to be interrupted. For instance, what participation structures might a teacher introduce to a classroom in order to allow, even encourage, students’ voices to be heard? How might a teacher listen to and count silence as a form of participation, while attending to a student’s writing or conversations with peers outside of formal class discussions? Further, when should a teacher interrupt a student’s silence and demand that she speak? Is there such a thing as a counterfeit silence, a silence born of laziness or refusal to emotionally or intellectually engage in school? What are the teachers’ and the students’ roles in these situations? Is it possible to imagine how the silent student might be participating in a useful, perhaps even a necessary, way? Does the silence allow others to speak? Are there indicators in a student’s silence that can help teachers pay more attention to the interpersonal or social dynamics of classrooms? How can educators set up classrooms to invite a wider range of participation that includes silence? Teachers might begin to look at these kinds of questions with groups of colleagues who share vignettes of practice in teacher inquiry groups. By documenting silence in their own classrooms and bringing these to an inquiry group, teachers can inform one another’s practice.

As educators interrogate silences in classrooms, it is critical that students not be allowed to choose silence as a way to opt out of learning. Leaving room for silence is a potentially dangerous path to follow because it might be interpreted as a way to exclude individuals or groups of students from participation in classrooms. Rather than advocating for silence, I urge teachers to listen deeply to both talk and silence in their classrooms through various modes of inquiry that might include their students or colleagues.

Classrooms are often structured around implicit and explicit rules
about talk and silence. These rules contain common assumptions about when and how silence is enacted that may ignore local cultural practices. Although it may be difficult for a teacher to understand all of the customs around silence and speech in her classroom, taking an inquiry stance allows for conversation around the decisions made by individuals and groups of students. Listening for, inquiring into, and honoring silence might lead to louder, more dynamic and engaged classrooms that have moments of stillness when students pause for reflection. Most important, inquiry into classroom silence and participation might lead to classrooms where equitable participation is defined as broadly as possible. This includes understanding how and when youth (and adults) might choose to remain silent and through that silence deliver a powerful speech or an incisive critique.

References


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