Silence(ing) across learning spaces: New considerations for educational research aims and rationale

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Abstract:

This special issue represents the collaborative work from a group of nine literacy scholars across the U.S. focused on the complexities of silence (i.e., absences of or hidden communicative assertions, histories, and cultural values) in discourse and how such complexities shape what is said or explicitly communicated during social interactions. What counts as silence in discourse? What roles can silence play in shaping or refining perspectives on or assumptions about reality and one's position in society or within local community spaces? Is silence, or the act of silencing, necessarily bad, or are there instantiations of such that foster collective insight and understanding? What can silence tell us in a post-truth era? The aims of this issue is to (a) make visible what silence, or the act of silencing, looks and sounds like in social learning contexts; and (b) provide scholars ways to use this elusive construct for unpacking the cultural and linguistic biases that are prevalent in educational contexts (Blaise, 2012; Sunderland, Cowley, Rahim, Leontzakou & Shattuck, 2000; Wolfe, 2000).

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Article:

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Scholars within religious studies, philosophy, rhetoric, communication, and linguistics have long explored the notion of silence as serving a particular role in various social contexts (e.g., Basso, 1970; Dauenhauer, 1982; Ephratt, 2008; Schröter, & Taylor, 2017). As such, silence or silent texts have been characterized as cultural norms for expressing sentiments of politeness or rudeness (Karl, 2011), or for responding to perceived uncertainty or unpredictability in social exchanges (Basso, 1970). Other researchers have discussed silence as a necessary cognitive 'ground' for processing and producing communicative moves (Bruneau, 1973) or as an infinite realm of unspoken potentials and becoming (Basso, 1980; Dauenhauer, 1982; Skousgaard, 1982). Silence has also been noted to serve as a literary strategy for increasing intimate, emotional connections between characters and readers (Anderson et al., 1985) and as rhetorical speech acts intended to influence perspectives of readers and listeners for a variety of purposes that include discrimination (Ephratt, 2008; Gal, 1989; Huckin, 2002). One of the most noted roles of silence is in deliberate or (more commonly) inadvertent perpetuations of inequity, such as 'color-blindness' (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Lewis, 2001; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Milner, 2007).

The above descriptions of 'silence' can be distilled to reflect linguists Tannen and Saville-Troike's (1985) characterization of silence as being anything but nothing. While such work punctuates the importance of silence in various forms and formalities of discourse, it remains unclear how researchers can systematically explore such a slippery construct for understanding key, critical actions within and across learning contexts.

More research over the last 20 years has argued for the importance of paying attention to what is not said (Mazzei, 2003; 2007; Gee, 2010; Schultz, 2010). In other words, how might researchers consider what is intentionally or unintentionally being left out of a conversation? To date, silence has been explored in various ways in educational research, including discursive studies of minoritized students' engagement with white-dominant literature (Carter, 2007), counterlanguaging practices of minoritized preservice teachers (Haddix, 2012), and longitudinal effects of tracking (Rogers, 2011). Further, findings from a classroom study by Remedios and colleagues (2008) emphasized the possibility that a student's silence should not necessarily be associated with the absence of learning; follow-up interviews with students who made relatively few verbal contributions during activities revealed sentiments of high-level engagement. Lemak (2012) found in her study of adult ESL students that silence can result in ambiguous interpretations during collaborative activities, leading to intercultural miscommunication. Ellwanger (2016) described how silence during classroom conversations about race could be an act of resistance. We aim to build on these studies to further clarify the ways that silence or silent texts are manifested in learning contexts, including classrooms, after school spaces, and online forums. We also aim to make more transparent the epistemological approaches for making visible what is difficult to observe in situ, and bring forth new methodological tools (conceptual lenses, questioning guides for participants, and multimodal, multilayered frames) for analyzing silence in social contexts. Such tools described throughout this special issue are designed to reveal different readings of silence - by students, teachers, researchers, and institutions – that might serve to either (re)produce or disrupt existing racial and social inequities.

The seven papers in this themed journal offer a variety of perspectives related to unpacking silence across various social contexts such as online social media, high school and elementary school classrooms, teacher inquiry groups, and interviews with students in higher education.

Specifically, we begin with a conceptual paper that offers a new way of framing silence as a 'listening space' for bringing hidden histories and relegated voices into public light through new language. Five studies, four related to K-12 classroom practices and one related to a travel abroad program in higher education follow this conceptual piece. The first study focuses on (mis)interpretations of silence during a series of conferences between a first grade student and his teacher. The second study explores how silence is used to exclude and make room for voices during small-group reading discussions within a sixth-grade classroom. The third study reveals how members of a high school teacher inquiry group maintain privileged silence by not asking the critical questions needed for self-reflection. The fourth study is an exploration of how unintended initiate-respond-evaluate (IRE) sequences and other dominant ideologies related to literary analysis served to silence dialogic action during a high school literature discussion. The fifth study is a critical discourse analysis of how undergraduate students of color characterize their experiences traveling abroad and how markers of class are silenced during such characterizations. All of these studies reveal the multilayered complexities of silence for thinking, doing and being in and across social spaces.

Along with such phenomenological insights are descriptions of new methodological tools aimed to support critical inquiry needed for uncovering and addressing the hegemonic tensions and inequities that persist in education (e.g., Neal-Jackson, 2018; Polnick et al., 2020). As such, we aim to push ourselves, like so many of us in education, to envision a new era of K-20 research, one that liberates us from colonial practices. To end, Dr. Compton-Lilly summarizes the theoretical and empirical work presented in this issue, utilizing critical discourse analysis tools (i.e., metaphor analysis, subjectification, nominative voice) and dimensions of Critical Race/Language theories to explore how silences are discussed, revealed, and explained by contributing authors. We hope that this issue inspires a conversation across educators, researchers, and other educational stakeholders who face a post-pandemic world of uncertainty and sociopolitical vitriol. We must first learn how to listen and see what is happening, what histories, systems, and ideologies continue to dominate us, before we can make the changes needed for fostering an equitable society.

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