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# Silence at school: Uses and experiences of silence in pedagogy at a secondary school

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Silence infuses all aspects of our daily communications: what we say and what remains unspoken; those to whom we speak, and those we ignore; those we trust and respect, and those we do not. In the school environment, interactions between students and teachers lie at the heart of pedagogy. This relationship is also marked by its silences, and the concept of 'student voice' arose out of these silences on matters that affect students. However, the role of silence in such interactions has yet to receive comprehensive attention. This article presents the findings of a study on the uses and experiences of silence in the classroom with secondary school students aged 14–15 years and their teachers. Drawing on nine group discussions and 33 interviews with 20 teachers and 35 students, respectively, I argue that an oversight of silence in the student voice discipline has obscured the power dimensions of student voice, and the injustices that become visible when different forms of silence are illuminated. I argue that there are two core ideas which emerge from the findings: firstly, that silent practices manifest in two distinct paradigms of productivity and listening which function as expectations of teaching and learning; secondly, that the conflation of the listening paradigm with respect demonstrates the capacity of silent practices to reinforce the division between teaching and learning to become mediums of injustice. I conclude that this dichotomous relationship between pedagogy and student voice requires a pedagogy based on a critical examination of respect.

**Keywords:** pedagogy; respect; silence; student voice

## Introduction

The notion of 'voice' is often presented as a powerful legitimator in research (Arnot & Reay, 2007), but Spyrou (2016) argues that silence has received scant attention from childhood scholars, despite its potential for enhancing our understanding of students' voices. Similarly, Lewis (2010) observes that choosing to 'opt in' to voice is a simultaneous opting out of silence. This is not to assume that the forms and practices of silence may not be 'voice' in themselves, however; Cook-Sather (2006) warns that using the term 'voice' to represent a repositioning of students in research runs the risk of denying the power of silence and resistance. In this context, therefore, the exploration of silence may be just as, if not more, informative about students' experiences than 'voice'. Indeed, silences may have many dimensions that have hitherto been unexplored or overlooked (Poland & Pederson, 1998; Gray, 2007; Lewis, 2010). Lewis (2010) urges attention to the preference of some students for silence because

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efforts to illuminate students' voices invariably omit that which remains undisclosed, and 'every sentence we speak is continually surrounded by, and lies between, what is not said and may, in fact, be unsayable' (Rogers, 2005: 164).

A number of tensions have emerged from poststructuralist scholars in the childhood studies discipline who have troubled the representation of children's voices (MacLure, 2009; Spyrou, 2011, 2016; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012; see also Jackson & Mazzei, 2009). 'Student voice' can be misleading because it implies a unitary voice which does not acknowledge complex individual subjectivities, context or relational power disparities between teachers and students (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). The possibility of 'capturing' the authentic voices of children is challenged as it troubles the assumption that there is a correct method of doing so (Spyrou, 2016). By exclusively seeking the spoken, we omit the unspoken, and the opportunity to go beyond surface meanings towards the possibilities for a more nuanced reading of voice (Lewis, 2010; Spyrou, 2011, 2016; see also Mazzei, 2009). Cook-Sather (2006) further argues that silence can be 'full and resonant', and regardless of the interpretation, is an essential consideration in discussions of voice (Cook-Sather, 2006: 369). Whilst silence is partially understood as 'nothingness' or absence, Bang and Winther-Lindquist (2016: 1) suggest that this 'nothingness' should be considered as 'human transformations of their cultural being and becoming'. Accordingly, even physical or literal silences are examples of the 'presence of silence' rather than the 'absence of sounds' in creating meaning; what Bang and Winther-Lindquist (2016: 2) present as the 'presence of the absence' (see also Billig & Marinho, 2019). Such absences demand attention to the production of silences in our social worlds (Murray & Durrheim, 2019), and demand asking questions of how and why they are produced.

Mazzei (2011) argues that silent discourses are produced by 'desire'. This notion of silence as desire is one that is generative, rather than framed in deficit, and productive of privilege, power and voice. According to Mazzei's analysis, views of desire as a 'deficit' suggest that desire functions to fill a void, yet this understanding of desire as something to be satisfied obscures its productive function. For Mazzei, 'desire' in her work with White teachers produced a desire to voice 'whiteness' in ways that preserved the status quo and reproduced White privilege, identity and power. Such desire produced a silence that perpetuated White identity as 'unchanged, unchallenged and in control' (p. 658). Mazzei's 'desiring silence' inheres in the 'not said': the desirous, silent voice that is produced by longing for normative power and unchallenged privilege.

Attending to manifestations of power captures both 'voice' in its traditional understanding of those who speak, and also the voices of those who remain silent in the acoustic of the school, creating a space in which to examine what experiences remain in silence—in particular for students who inhabit less powerful positions in the structure of educational institutions. This article will contribute to this scholarship by adapting such a notion of desire to the contours of school-based relationships, where teachers traditionally hold the power, examining how the manifestations of silence may illuminate the production of desire. Accordingly, I adopt a definition of silence as both a state of being and an equivocal space into which we project our motivations in accordance with our needs and desires. Whilst silence is broadly understood as the absence of sound, I will argue that it is, instead, an irreducible and complex concept

that characterises all power relationships in different forms, and which must, therefore, be understood in all its various dimensions for 'student voice' to be both more inclusive as a concept and a practice in schools.

## **Context and background**

There is limited literature on silence in schools, and those studies that do exist are dated; silence is overlooked in the relational fabric of the school and this is supported in the educational literature. Jaworski and Sachdev's (1998) quantitative study surveyed 319 students aged between 14 and 16 using a questionnaire in three secondary schools in Wales, UK. Whilst acknowledging that the uses of silence are regulated by a number of factors including setting, sociolinguistic norms and expectations, and the relative power of participants, Jaworski and Sachdev's (1998) study explicitly addressed the beliefs and attitudes that remained implicit in other writings on silence. Jaworski and Sachdev's (1998) research was the first, and only, study to examine beliefs about silence in the classroom, and their findings led them to suggest that more empirical work focusing on how teacher and student values and beliefs about silence affect teaching and learning specifically in the classroom is necessary. The link between silence and pedagogy was partially addressed by Ollin (2008: 268), who found that silence in teaching is used for dramatic impact, and as a strategy for settling groups, as well as for focus, control, discipline and thinking time. However, this research took a phenomenological approach which was limited to teachers' descriptions of their practice, and Ollin did not collect data from students.

A reflexive article by Mazzei (2008) highlighted the connection between silence and race, and examined in particular the role of power in such silences. Mazzei's study was predominantly with White, non-Hispanic early and middle-childhood students and presented how 'whiteness' as a descriptor for White people often went unspoken; a silence that provided an interesting framework for analysing conversations with her students. Mazzei posed two statements for her students to respond to: (i) Sometimes I am silent because; and (ii) Sometimes I am silent in this class because... Responses to these questions converged around 'fear', as identified by Mazzei: the first question overwhelmingly reflected a fear of being wrong, a fear of offending or hurting others, and a fear that their ideas would stand out in comparison to their peers; notably, answers to the second question similarly included a fear of answering incorrectly or offending others, but also a struggle to articulate what they wanted to say. This fear included a sense that others would 'not understand or respect' their response (p. 1132). Yet, these silences which protect power, for example racially inhabited silences, occurred from the perspective of subjects who are in a position of power: White privilege. A reflexive piece that focused on adult students' experiences in higher education, Mazzei's research did not collect data from secondary school students and was not applied to the power dynamics specific to a secondary school environment.

In contrast, Gilmore's (1985) ethnographic study on students' academic success demonstrated the significance of ritualistic displays of silence in classroom interactions and the transmission and reproduction of power through silence. For teachers, silent displays were often initiated by signals that demarcated the silence with sound,

such as slamming the door in order to convey that student behaviour was unacceptable, and to facilitate the pace and cadence of classroom interactions. Student silences, in contrast, in Gilmore's (1985) study, were largely to facilitate the discourse of the teacher, a silence that characterised the 'participation structure' of the classroom (Gilmore, 1985: 148). This study confirmed that students were more silent in the classroom than their teachers, and that this silence was largely owing to time 'spent overwhelmingly in listening and reading' (Gilmore, 1985: 143). Jaworski and Sachdev (1998) interpreted Gilmore's finding, echoed in their own research, as especially important, considering that it reflects the fundamental division between teacher and student talk as that of 'teaching' and 'learning', respectively.

Finke (1993, cited in Mazzei, 2011) suggests that teachers' desire to evoke specific responses from students positions students in a paradoxical position of both desiring and resisting, because desire arises from what we want to preserve and what we want to reproduce: power and privilege, or identity (Mazzei, 2011). Indeed, silences are important in circumscribing identity (Mazzei, 2016). Silence, therefore, can be equivocal in maintaining the status quo, or in resisting power and authority. If, as Colebrook (2002, cited in Mazzei, 2011) suggests, 'desire itself is power, a power to become and produce' (p. 94), then when students remain silent, they can avoid a loss of power and control that is paradoxically maintained in normative and hegemonic silence. In order to understand the meanings of silence in its various manifestations, particularly in school contexts where there can be pronounced power disparities, it is essential to attend not only to 'knowing' silences of teaching and learning, but also to the manifestations of power which traverse such expressions of silence.

Such manifestations include the comfort that comes from the protection of teacher authority for students; they may 'resist' such authority, but they may also resist being freed from such authority because in doing so they avoid risking the dismantling of a fragile subjectivity (Finke, 1993). The desire to maintain an intact, if fragile, identity is one that is silent on the surface, and therefore 'compliant, conforming and dependent' (Mazzei, 2011: 664). This is important for research on silence, because power and notions of authority incorporate conceptions of what can and cannot be spoken, and when one should maintain silent restraint (Bruneau, 1973). There is a consequent need to attend to the silences which inhere in pedagogical interactions in order to understand the interests that produce desire, and the interests that desire seeks to produce or protect (Mazzei, 2011).

## **Methodology**

I sought to investigate whether silence is a crucial dimension of student voice, and if so, how this was used and experienced by students and teachers in secondary school. The research question I posed was: *How do students and teachers understand, use and experience silence in the classroom, in school as a whole and in relationships with others?* The research took place in a secondary school with students in Year 11 in a small town in the UK. Participants were recruited purposively from a top, middle and bottom set of the Year 11 cohort, because I wished to examine if students from different sets had different uses and experiences of silence. This year group was chosen because

students would have established experience of secondary school to inform their participation. Teacher participants were also recruited using purposive selection.

A Young Persons Advisory Group (YPAG) was set up as part of a rights-based methodology which views young people as experts in their own lived experience, and who are, therefore, best placed to advise the researcher on research procedures (see Lundy, 2007; Lundy & McEvoy, 2011). The YPAG was set up before data collection began in order to consult young people on how the study should proceed and to gain initial responses to the research design. As advisors, the YPAG remained separate to participants and was not part of data collection. Participants, and the YPAG, were presented with information sheets explaining confidentiality and anonymity and all participants gave their informed, written consent; any reported names in this article are, therefore, anonymised pseudonyms. Both students and teachers participated because, as a teacher myself, I did not want to observe teachers' lessons and not provide a channel for them to have their voices heard also. A total of 42 students and 27 teachers consented to participate in the research, which engaged with a variety of methods. To begin, I carried out 50 semi-structured lesson observations which were employed as a contextual backdrop against which to understand data. Observations began with a conscious decision to not focus too closely on what I *wanted* to observe, but rather on a chronological account of what was there (or absent), together with what was suggested for observation by the YPAG. These suggestions included: (a) how students and teachers talk to each other; (b) how teachers address each other; (c) whether students and teachers respect each other; (d) whether young people challenge teachers' knowledge and how the teacher responds; and (e) how students respond to the teacher when asked a question.

It is important to acknowledge that these observations were not data, but served to illuminate data collected using nine group discussions and 33 interviews with students and teachers, respectively. Group discussions took the form of deliberative, democratic dialogue driven by participants' own ideas and thinking (Cassidy, 2017) about silence and formed an opportunity for young people to reveal their understanding of their experiences, and to do so *collaboratively*; not simply offering responses that are mediated by adults and curriculum demands. These discussions were followed by interviews of no more than three participants, which were carried out on the basis that they were both a conversation and an exchange of ideas as opposed to standardised questioning. Interviews with young people also offered a forum in which to continue conversations that occurred in the group discussions. Of the 42 students and 27 teachers who participated, 35 students engaged in 15 interview sessions and 20 teachers engaged in 18 interview sessions. The conceptual discussions and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and the data was coded inductively using NVivo. Coding provided an organisational framework within which to report the findings, because it draws out the more functional aspects of silence in school.

Thematic analysis propounded by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) was used to explore the uses and experiences of silence because it provided a systematic and sophisticated way of approaching qualitative data as a whole. This was also chosen because it suited the research questions and data collection methods, which were experiential and exploratory (Braun & Clark, 2012). I present the findings below, beginning with a description of how silence was defined and understood, before

reporting both students' and teachers' experiences of silence: its forms and practices, and an exploration of the purposes and motivations as they relate to teaching and learning. The consequences of such practices are subsequently presented. Quotes in italics are reported speech from participants, and all names are pseudonyms. Quotes indicate which set each student was from: 'class 1', 'class 2' and 'class 3' indicate top, middle and bottom set, respectively. Where a student name is not indicated, this quotation is from group discussions where names of students were not recorded during transcription. Rising above these functional aspects of silence are broader themes of knowledge and respect identified by the thematic analysis; these are explored in the discussion which follows.

### **A new dimension to student voice: silence at school**

#### *Definitions and understandings of silence*

Overwhelmingly, silence was broadly understood, both by students and teachers, as the opposite of 'noise' or 'sound', reflecting what Jaworski (1993) identifies as prototypical forms of silence, or 'literal silences' (Billig & Marinho, 2019). Some students held more interpretive visions of silence and challenged whether there was, in fact, any such thing as silence, or whether the literal definition was sufficient in their experience: *'I think it's just an interpretation like some people see silence as something and some others are like no that's not silence. . .'* (Lydia, class 1).

This interpretive example was summed up as *'when you ignore all the sounds around you'* and as *'turning your ears off'* (Lydia, class 1). Yet, definitions depended on what 'silence' was under discussion: *'If it's silence in a classroom it's just no talking, there's no, like, verbal interactions. . .'* (Ben, class 2). This suggests a paradoxical acknowledgement that when it comes to a classroom environment, silence is understood as no sound. Others responded using figurative language to describe the abstract aspect of how they understood silence and its uses: *'It's just. . . like blank. Like a blank sheet. And you're all just waiting to put like your stamp onto the sheet'* (Sarah, class 1). These images of silence were also captured in allegorical terms, as a restriction to expression of opinion:

- Ben (class 2): *Silence is like a river that's stopped flowing. So nothing's moving*  
 Researcher: *I do like that. It's like a river that's stopped flowing. Now I'm going to ask you another question. What is it in the river of silence that flows?*  
 Ben: *Em. . . maybe it's just you—I'd say maybe it's your opinion, like your. . . ability to share your opinion that stops flowing when you're silent. [Animated] And so when the fish come along and it's flowing, your opinion's helping them.*  
 Researcher: [laughs] *Who are the fish?*  
 Ben: *People*

This exchange of views and opinions suggested that when silent, students' ability to share their opinions was restricted. Further, the understanding of silence was implicitly linked to the exchange of knowledge: *' . . . just taking something out of a certain thing, like, if you were silent in a conversation you're taking your opinion out of it'* (Ben, class 2).

Like the students, teachers broadly understood and defined silence as no sound or ‘complete quietness’. Some teachers responded with surprise or consternation when asked if they could define silence. These responses suggested that ‘silence’ was taken for granted as not needing a definition to anchor its practices, and was understood largely as a performance. Some teachers described silence in figurative terms as ‘a shield’ or ‘a brick wall’. A variation on this aspect of silence as a defence was suggested, however, in terms of concealment, with silence construed as a ‘mask’ behind which students ‘can very easily hide in the silence’, where it can ‘look like’ they are being productive. This was framed in terms of work productivity, which suggested that the predominant understanding of silence was seen through the lens of having or acquiring knowledge.

### *Forms and practices of silence*

*Teaching and learning.* Largely, students were passively receptive of ‘information’, with interactions mostly based around knowledge transmission to fill gaps when students did not return the correct answer, or responded with silence. Lessons were dominated by teacher talk and students listened silently, which was an expectation: one teacher stipulated, ‘there’s one thing that I expect when I’m speaking: that you don’t’.

Of course, students’ perspectives on these forms and practices of silence did recognise teachers’ uses of silence as a working space, and for thinking or concentrating, but students also described ‘switching off’ to annoy the teacher. Adam (class 3) described using silence in the classroom as ‘don’t talk to anyone, not listen to them’, suggesting that students’ uses of silence were acts of obstruction and resistance. Hannah (class 1) described silence as in terms of knowledge: ‘Lack of knowhow probably as well. You don’t know, don’t care. Get away from me’. Of note here is that this position of lacking knowledge progressed into inertia, which contributed to their disengagement; they withdrew entirely from the discourse, and retreated into silence. In a group session on power, young people in class 2 described how they did not hold any power in school because:

... teachers take it upon themselves like to try to... they think that they’re there to like teach children, so they won’t let them teach themselves... learn for themselves so they constantly, sort of, treat them as children... They give less power to them, they’re not allowed to speak. (class 2)

This was repeated in sessions with class 3, where young people described how teachers thought they knew more because they were adult, and about teachers ‘*thinking we’re stupid*’ and simultaneously thinking they knew ‘everything’: ‘*they always think they’re right all the time. That’s why they don’t believe us*’ (Anna, class 3). Young people in this case seemed to have internalised implicit messages about their ‘bad’ character and this was directly linked to their ‘knowing’ status:

Anna: *Like, people that are bad, teachers don’t think they want to learn, but like, they do want to learn.*

Bronagh: *I think they should let us pick like, how we want to learn it, instead of like them just like shoving and like forcing us to do it.*

Researcher: *So how would you pick? What would you pick?*



Anna: *I'd say like, it would be better if like they explained it out properly for us, like instead of just writing all this stuff down, cause you don't actually remember it; I don't remember anything that I write down. But if they speak to us about it, I think you can remember it better.*

This 'non-knower' status, or unnamed representation of certain young people in the streaming system as not wanting to learn, underpins what appears to be one of the bedrocks of teaching and learning methods: copying in silence. This misrecognition was also present in other sets; young people did not think they were seen as knowledgeable, and identified being seen as '*immature*' (group discussion, class 2) or as '*children*' (group discussion, class 2). This was seen to be '*most of the time and most teachers*' (group discussion, class 2).

*Respect.* Forms and practices of silence were often related to the concept of respect, which teachers and students found difficult to define. There was a tension between silence and the practice of respect, and in being *told* to be quiet. In a group discussion with class 2, to be silent was to show respect:

YP: *When you're just told to be quiet*

Researcher: [. . .] *Is that silence asked for, or is it imposed by another person?*

YP: *Both*

Researcher: *Both? [YP: Yeah] And how is that related to respect in that case?*

YP: *If you've been told to do it then you have to*

In this excerpt, the practice was likened to instruction and command, rather than participation. Adam (class 3) framed this practice in terms of *learning* respect, where he had wanted to say something to a teacher, but instead remained silent:

Adam (class 3): *No, I just learned respect in the past 3 years*

Researcher: *What's respect? What do you mean by respect?*

Adam: *Like, think before you speak, you know like, thinking like, what the consequences are going to be if you say this*

It appears here that respectful silence is understood in terms of evading punishment, which clearly demarcates the workings of power. These power implications were clear when considering teacher respect towards students: '*. . . teachers ask for respect and they don't respect you*' (Connie, class 2). Here, Connie distinguished respect from position and power, and suggested that teachers should not have to be respected by students simply because they are their teacher. This nonreciprocal nature of respect in the student–teacher relationship was a sticking point for students in terms of being *silenced*:

Ben (class 2): *Because most of the time when I get told off, I'm not able to say anything back or share my opinions so I just get told off with them not knowing what my side of the story is, so it doesn't feel like anything really moved on, or they like maybe know a bit better, or a bit more about me or anything like that.*

Researcher: *Is that a choice you've made where you've decided I'm not going to speak, or do you feel like silence is being imposed on you?*

Ben: *If it's in the class and you're getting told off, it's imposed by the teacher. They set the silence so, I mean, yeah, it would be their doing.*

Notably, this practice was deemed to obstruct teachers' knowledge of both students' perspectives, but also of students themselves, a sentiment that was also expressed by Anna (class 3): *'I don't know, it's like, they don't actually like know us'*. This suggests that one of the implications of the practices of silence may be that, as passive receptors of information, students remove their perspectives and opinions from the discourse entirely.

Teachers' responses also made significant reference to silence and respect, connecting these together using 'listening'. Indeed, some teachers found it easier to conceptualise what they understood to be *disrespect* rather than *respect*: not listening. A senior teacher explained it as *'when I'm speaking I expect them to listen'*, justifying this stance by referring to the demarcation between teachers and learners in the classroom: *'90% of the time, the majority of knowledge is coming from me, so it's sort of more important they listen to me than I listen to them'*. Listening on the part of students was often associated with the transmission of knowledge, accompanied by the assumption that knowledge was transmitted by teacher talk.

### *Purposes and motivations of silence*

*Productivity and focus.* Students recognised that one of the most prevalent purposes of silence on the part of teachers was as a means of propagating a 'thinking' space, evading distraction and 'work' or productivity. Teachers described silence as *'stimulating thought'* and avoiding distraction. In its prototypical form, silence was listening while the teacher spoke; thinking and avoiding distraction were framed in terms of productivity. Students, in contrast, advised that sometimes they are hesitant to ask for help. One young woman described how her class would sometimes be told off for talking about the task:

Teachers don't really understand that we actually do talk about what we're doing... because sometimes students don't understand what they're supposed to be doing so they're asking what is it I actually have to do. (Tara, class 1)

This response suggests that these 'productive' silences are not all the same, and must be observed and interpreted by each teacher for each child. Yet teachers tended to depict the purposes of silence between two aspects of productivity: 'expected' silences for listening and receiving instruction as discussed above, and 'imposed' silences *'when they're fully engaged in a task if they're fully concentrating'*. This imposed silence simultaneously prohibited dialogue. This representation of silence presupposes that students do not have knowledge to exchange or co-produce, but are 'busy' in the business of receiving it from the teacher. Despite this, one teacher described *'moments of silence'*, suggesting that other forms of silence resided within productivity, which were less easily identified:

... there are other moments of silence that a teacher needs to observe. And that, again, could be through vacant expressions, puzzled struggling, I need help but I can't put my

hand up and speak to you because I don't want to say to you in front of my other peers in the classroom.

Students also challenged traditional understandings of knowledge and silence, suggesting that a student's silence may be construed as 'not knowing' rather than a process of getting to know. In a similar vein to Bang and Winther-Lindquist's (2016) argument that nothingness can be understood as a transformation of being and becoming, Deborah (class 2) explained:

... you don't know how to explain it, you just know that's what it is, you know what I mean? [...] because you can get confused and muddled and then you can make other people confused and then you have to try to explain it to them but you don't know how to and then the whole thing just gets annoying!

*Concealment and protection.* Similar to Mazzei's (2008) findings with higher education students of childhood studies, students in this study discussed using silence as concealment in order to protect themselves and others, and as a means of avoiding embarrassment in responding to a question incorrectly, which resulted in students hiding in silence to avoid drawing attention to themselves. In a group discussion with class 1, students identified silence as protection and censorship or controversy amongst their peer group, to avoid offending or hurting others because of potential misunderstanding of what students were saying:

Cause like if someone doesn't understand what you're thinking, you wouldn't want to say it to them in case it came out of context. . . Like in class, younger people will talk about things that older people just won't understand or know what they're talking about. (YP, group 1)

A key consequence of this of course is that some students' views and opinions remain unspoken and unknown. One young person in class 1 suggested, however, that it depended on the teacher:

Researcher: *What does it depend on?*

Edward: *How respectful they are to you* [laughs]

Grace: *How much of like a person that they are, if you know what I mean. So like not just them being a figurehead, like you couldn't just walk up to someone that you're not really close to and like, say whatever, but like if you've built up a relationship with a teacher and they're like, showing you that they have like a personal side and like, you know, then you're more inclined to open up to them.*

The reference to '*how much of a person*' a teacher was to a young person was striking here as in reference to '*respectful*' behaviour, it suggests that if students do not feel respected they may remain silent towards authority figures. Students often used laughter to indicate satire and as a means to challenge the status quo—an instance of desiring silence to resist social norms. In this instance, the concept of teacher respect towards students was subverted, not by explicitly naming it, but by what was concealed with laughter.

## Consequences of silence

### *Silent messages*

The practices of silence, and the motivations that underlie these practices, converge in the key consequence of silence that emerged from the study. Such consequences centre around the implicit messages and signals that young people read and concluded about their positioning in school. These silent messages were akin to the hidden curriculum and may be understood as what young people ‘knew’ and accepted, but were not explicitly named. Both the forms and practices of silence, and the purposes and motivations of such silence, coalesced in silent messages around three interrelated matters: gender, ability and socioeconomic background.

There was an implicit gender-based aspect to silence which was more latent in the data. In mixed-gender interview groups, young men were more likely to silence young women by interrupting them, or by speaking over them. In group sessions, however, young men often needed prompting for their contributions. Whilst some young men were more reserved, in other instances these prompts were an implicit indication on my part that the young men were speaking over, and therefore silencing, others. This was clear in prompts such as ‘*Boys what, what about you?*’ (class 2, group discussion). On occasion, these prompts were preceded by young men having their own conversations separately to the group dialogue, which might be viewed as a form of silence in itself:

Researcher: *Ok but do you think maybe that there’s like a...* [Boys talking over] [Whistling]  
 [YP trying to speak but drowned out]  
 [2 second silence—boys continuing their conversation]  
*That you’ll need to know...* [YP: Yeah] *for life?* [Boys’ laughter]  
*Boys, what do you think?* [2 second silence] [YP refers to ‘stop laughing’]

Prompts for contributions from young women differed because they were often used to address a tendency of some young women to remain largely silent when young men carried the conversation: ‘*What about you girls?*’. My gender-specific address to young people was intended to regulate their behaviour and conversation; this was also clear in observations of lessons during the study, particularly so in relation to young men. These addresses took the form of euphemisms which centred around telling young men in particular to be quiet, by making reference to their maturity, or suggesting talking would result in extended writing tasks. In an interview, one teacher of a bottom set (a class that did not participate in the study) described his class as having ‘*a few tricky ones like those guys at the back of the classroom*’ who were all male, and this was explained with reference to their maturity:

... different levels of maturity. Some are much more mature than others and they come in you know and they get their books out and they settle down and then there’s some guys in the class in particular are a bit more immature and a bit silly so their interactions are a bit childish and immature and things like that. (Brian)

There was a prevailing sense, in the same vein as this quotation implicitly suggests, that young men were perceived as being louder and more disruptive than girls. I asked this question specifically to class 2 in a group discussion:

Researcher: [...] *do you think there's a difference between, em, preferences for silence with boys and girls?* [4 second silence]

YP, MALE: *Boys are normally probably seen as louder.*

One young man indicated that he did not voice his disagreements, perhaps because *'we'll probably just get worse off for it, if you do tell them'* (Jack, class 2), but also perhaps due to a fear of being seen as stupid: *'most of the time I'm asking her what we're doing. She never tells us what we're doing!'* (Jack, class 2). This may suggest a relationship between silence and gender, where the behaviour exhibited by young men is perceived to be more disruptive when they are unsure of what to do in lessons, and are unsure of how, or perhaps are unwilling, to ask for help.

In one science lesson with class 3, the teacher frequently addressed his instructions such as *'copy this down then lads'* to the class in which the minority young women, who sat together, appeared to be invisible, perhaps because they rarely spoke. Helen's comments on silence were illuminating along gender lines, considering that her class was predominantly young men:

Yeah, I think in some of the more challenging classes, it's a fight for dominance. So silence isn't really perceived as being a dominant character. So it's all, who can be heard the loudest, or seen, or who can be noticed, which one is the teacher going to be speaking to the most, they're nearly trying to be the kingpin of the classroom. . .

Such sentiments were echoed by another teacher whose comments were also implicitly gendered because *'lower classes'* were those which were predominantly male. Yet, these sentiments were conflicted:

In my experience, the lower classes tend to be more openly defiant. And it's more. . . well, not necessarily more openly defiant. Their defiance would maybe be the. . . the more noticeable ones a.k.a. outspoken, maybe not doing their homework, arriving late, speaking back. (Eric)

The silent messages of gender and ability, crucially, include what young people are told implicitly, but which remains unspoken. One group of young women from class 1 identified this implicit message with regard to their own streaming experiences. One young person specified that *'if they say they're in [the bottom set] you know they're badly behaved'* (Izzie, group 1), but that sometimes this was not the case. They gave the example of their friend who was initially streamed into the bottom set, but was now in the top set, *'because he worked hard'* (Hannah, group 1). However, this understanding was troubled by another who pointed out that *'sometimes personality is associated with knowledge'* (Izzie, group 1), which was quickly equated with socioeconomic status:

Hannah: *The lower classes, a lot of them are badly behaved but I think, they're from different places, they don't. . .*

- Izzie: *They have different backgrounds.*  
 Hannah: *They have different backgrounds. . . but I don't want to sound like it's being cheeky. That's not being cheeky sure it's not?*  
 Izzie: *No, you're just telling the truth.*  
 Hannah: *But then like, people from our class the 'smarter' class.*  
 Izzie: *Are from wealthy backgrounds.*  
 Hannah: *But then other ones don't. It's strange.*  
 Researcher: *So are we skirting around the concept of class?*  
 Izzie: *Yep.*  
 Hannah: *Uh huh. [. . .]*  
 Hannah: *I don't know anybody in like the lower classes who are higher social class. Like there is nobody in those. . .*  
 Researcher: *Is that something that is not spoken about?*  
 Hannah: *Not really, no.*

Indeed, in a group session, this young man (class 1, previously class 3) spoke about his experiences directly, saying that he felt '*knowledge wasn't one of the big roles in the classroom*' and instead it was '*more like trying to control you*'. When comparing his experiences of the higher tier, he explained the difference as '*more focused on learning*'; a distinction Frank (class 1) held to have the ability to '*burden you and divide you up*'.

## Discussion

This research demonstrates that while silence was understood broadly as 'no noise' and as 'no action', it was also largely understood as open to, and contingent upon, the purposes and desires that underpinned its use. Students' understandings of silence highlighted a view of silence as a blank space which was open to a variety of motivations, but there remained an implicit link between silence as a severance of sharing views and opinions and the wider themes of knowledge and sharing ideas. Nevertheless, students overwhelmingly experienced silence as a medium of respect; an aspect of silence which is often omitted in considering student voice in school. Students responded to this experience by employing silence both as a defence mechanism and as a form of resistance; a means of avoiding or concealing both information, behaviour and, consistent with Mazzei's (2008, 2011) findings, fear and embarrassment.

The findings demonstrate that silence in teaching and learning practices was used for productivity and for respect, both of which were conjoined by 'listening'. I refer to these uses and practices as the 'productivity' and 'listening' paradigms, respectively in this article. Two core ideas emerge from the findings: firstly, that the productivity and listening paradigms function as expectations of students' learning, but that the underlying purposes of such practices may serve, instead, to obstruct knowledge exchange, and result in *disrespectful practices* which mask the workings of power in such silences; secondly, the conflation of the listening paradigm with respect demonstrates the workings of power in the student voice discipline, which contradicts the foundations of student voice in respect for the worth of the individual. The relationship between student voice and superficial understandings of respect has been discussed by Cook-Sather (2006), but the notion of respect is also central to practices of silence because it reflects the desire to maintain the status quo, and to reproduce existing power relations.

The findings of this research demonstrate the danger of the expectations that underpin the listening and productivity paradigms: that silence equates to ‘work’ or productivity; and that silence also equates to learning. These expectations of silence, manifest through the listening and productivity paradigms, thwarted significant exchanges between students and teachers, and between students and their peers, because young people were *expected* to remain silent. This may account for partial knowledge exchanges, and therefore partial silences, where students were permitted to respond with a prescribed answer, but not to probe or examine knowledge exchange, or the pedagogical positions of teachers and students, respectively. I argue that these prescribed answers, whereby students regurgitated previously transmitted information, are forms of silence because students are to remain silent on matters of pedagogy—the medium of student participation in teaching and learning. This may suggest that the desire to keep students in a position of ‘non-knowing’ may underpin such silences, which in turn serve to maintain the status quo. It may also suggest a view of ‘student voice’ as an end, rather than an ongoing process of participation, particularly in relation to pedagogy. Importantly, such silences serve to gradually erode participation because students withdraw from discourse and disengage, which ultimately takes the form of denying students a voice, or producing ‘silent voices’.

Students acknowledged the use of silence as a ‘*thinking space*’ and as a productive enabler, yet on other occasions, they described ‘*switching off*’ to subvert the teacher’s expectations, and this included not listening: a silent resistance to the listening paradigm became apparent. This is strongly suggestive of a silence which masked the workings of power through apathy or resignation to dominant paradigms of productivity, listening and their conflation with respect; this is in addition to Mazzei (2011: 667), who conceptualised manifestations of silence in her teaching relationships as ‘masking that which was unthinkable or unspeakable’. In such a situation, students removed—that is, silenced—their opinions and views from the classroom environment. The perception of silence in terms of *expectation* is illuminating here because whether speech is expected, and what and how it is spoken, takes on further significance where it is expected by an authority figure, but intentionally withheld by the speaker; in this form, silence is an expression. The findings also implicitly suggest that students’ understanding of respect rejected paternalistic forms of authority, and that respect was understood as being treated as ‘people’. This is at odds with the association throughout the data of respect with silent listening; what Mazzei (2011: 664) argues is a silent voice produced by a desire to keep their identity intact, and which looks ‘compliant, conforming and dependent’.

Young people’s use of silence as an expressive force resided in withholding speech when disengaged, extending their uses of silence to the listening paradigm for the purposes of obstruction and resistance. Students’ uses of silence as resistance and defiance, whilst exertions of power and forms of expression, also served to reproduce some experiences of silence as injustice along the lines of both gender and ability. Young people’s uses of silence as resistance took pedagogic forms which differed by set—as internal reluctance to respond to questions in fear of being seen as ‘stupid’ or offending others for class 1, the top set, or, occasionally, in outright refusal to participate in learning as a resistance to teacher’s ‘knower’ authority in class 3, the bottom set. This resistance served to disadvantage students and further exclude them from

participation in teaching and learning in a manner that was disparate according to gender and socioeconomic status, and young people themselves identified that students in low sets were more economically fragile. This is a manifestation of injustice because these silences were ultimately harmful to young people, but were represented as symbols of their immaturity or gender. Critically, power and gender as a central aspect of the unsaid can be inconspicuous (Coles & Glenn, 2019); in this study, they were masked by paradigms of productivity and listening. The role of these paradigms in adult-centric conceptualisations of respect informed the consequent silences around communally held suppositions about what can be said, what is expected and what is allowed (Coles & Glenn, 2019). Student voice, therefore, whilst on the surface extended to young people as a whole, may be heard very differently for students in low sets, and particularly if they are male.

Interestingly, one notable silence on the part of students was around their voice in teaching and learning practices; students seemed to lack the resources and awareness to articulate concerns about knowledge production and participation in teaching and learning, which itself may reflect the omission of students' voices on matters of pedagogy. Middle to bottom-streamed classes (classes 2 and 3) understood learning as boring or unengaging and frequently commented on not knowing what they were meant to do in class. I argue that class 2, who were the middle set, were caught between the exclusion of silence that characterised class 3, and the limited participation of class 1 and were, therefore, positioned on the periphery of 'knowing'; not 'non-knowers', but not participants in the, albeit circumscribed, participation of class 1. Whilst the listening paradigm characterised all classes, it was most pronounced in class 3, which consisted predominantly of young men. The productivity paradigm which accompanied class 3 was, perhaps, an aural acknowledgement of the conflation between 'listening' and 'respect'; knowledge transmission to bottom sets often had a punitive aspect, for not 'listening'. Such findings suggest that the fear of a loss of identity specified by Mazzei (2011) may be directly related, in this study, to the identity that accompanies a young person's set, as well as their gender and socioeconomic background, and the role of silence in circumscribing identity (Mazzei, 2016). One excellent example of this is in class 3, quoted above, where students appeared to have internalised messages about their 'bad' character in relation to learning. Whilst Cook-Sather (2006) suggests that silence may be an informed choice after speaking and not being heard, this research demonstrates the capacity of silence to be an *uninformed* choice; the productivity and listening paradigms are crucial to such practices and motivations of silence because they obstruct both students' participation, and their choice not to participate in teaching and learning to the extent that students are not aware of the reasons they make these choices. I argue that in being disenfranchised by these forms of silence, students suffer an injustice and that some manifestations of silence are, therefore, overlooked forms of injustice which manifest in everyday, person-to-person silences; persistent uses of silence which keep them in this position, but which were disguised or masked by both the productivity and listening paradigms of expectation. Such uses of silence reflected the power disparity between 'non-knowing' students and 'knowing' teachers, but also the disparity between sets, which made these injustices more difficult to detect and identify, both by students themselves, and their teachers.



The findings also indicated that silent practices in teaching and learning were associated with respect, but that this concept was not used consistently between students and teachers. Discussions around silence often returned to respect, but both students and teachers found this difficult to define, and a tension was apparent with the association of 'respect' with the listening paradigm. Teachers in particular equated 'not listening' with *disrespect*, demonstrating their expectations of passive knowledge transmission. Students frequently rejected the traditional and paternalistic concept of respect as deference to authority, while teachers considered respect as 'expectation', 'conformity' and 'listening'; a recurring pattern and a silence around understanding and ownership of the notion of respect in education. This highlights the complex implications of students' pedagogical positioning, not only for respect with regard to teaching and learning, but for pedagogical participation, or the lack thereof. What contributes to such complexity is the use of the productivity and listening paradigms to mask the power disparity in the classroom, and the employment of silence by young people as a medium for engaging in discourses (and struggles) of power.

Further complexity of students' pedagogical positioning can also be seen in the conflict of identity that accompanied young people's discussions. Several young people highlighted that they did not voice any concerns they had with teachers because they feared the consequences of doing so; of showing what may be perceived as 'disrespect'. Yet, this may also highlight a desire to protect their invisibility; a desiring silence that maintains what little power they have with which to resist. In remaining silent on such matters, students can resist being pulled from their comfort zones, but doing so simultaneously reinscribes teacher privilege and power, and students' own subordinate identity and pedagogical position as 'non-knowers'. One of the great paradoxes of silence, therefore, is that while students resist teacher authority using silence, they also resist being freed from this authority with silence; a tension emerges between desiring autonomy and recognition as epistemic agents, but simultaneously fearing the loss of identity. This desire to resist produces silence that regulates their voices: a silently articulated response that both reasserts and protects their subjectivity. In using silence to avoid saying something, they simultaneously voice something else; or their silences are interpreted according to another's desires. Individual desires function within the social whole and provide access to a silent voice that brings into play students' cultural and social histories: what it means for them to be children in school, which bears out a silence borne of relations (Jackson, 2009; Mazzei, 2011). These relational interactions in education produce silences that preserve what they have been disciplined to sustain: a silent voice produced by their desire to retain an intact, if restrained, identity and to avoid embarrassment in front of their peers.

It appears, and indeed the findings reflected, that the equation of silence with respect imbues the relationships between teachers and students in school with authority. Whilst the connection between respect and student voice is one that is well-established (see Cook-Sather, 2006), I argue that it is the *silences* around respect that defined the communication between students and teachers in a more nuanced and insightful way than traditional understandings of 'student voice', where silence is framed through the lens of authority. Silence used to respect figures of authority demonstrated a recognition of authority which was ruled by institutional expectations

aimed at maintaining ‘order’ (see also Hanna, forthcoming), and not necessarily a productive teaching and learning environment. There is a fundamental need for pedagogical approaches based on inherent respect for children and their capacity to contribute to and participate in the creation of, and structures for, respectful teaching and learning in the classroom. Both the listening and productivity paradigms, I argue, serve to create injustice, whereby the denial of respect for students by not including their voices in pedagogy culminates in their silences, which are themselves indistinguishable, because the expectations of silence from students on matters of teaching and learning are the norm.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that silence, whilst traditionally overlooked, is a crucial dimension of student voice because uses and experiences of silence have the capacity to become forms and mediums of injustice, where even their use as expression and resistance serve to reinforce and reproduce existing power relations. Cook-Sather (2006) suggests that withholding voice can be informed silences where students have attempted to speak but have gone unheard; I argue that student silences are informed by the listening and productivity paradigms which coalesce in teaching and learning, and respect. Lack of respect for students in teaching and learning informs many of the silences expressed by students, but the listening and productivity paradigms portray this, ironically, as respect for authority, and culminate in reinforcing injustices.

This study strongly suggests that there is a fundamental need for pedagogical approaches based on respect for students, and their participation in, and creation of, equality of learning in the classroom. This is a somewhat radical rethink of what has traditionally been a dichotomy between pedagogy and student voice (see Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016). This research suggests that students’ voices in pedagogy, and the expectations of silence around respect, are not mutually exclusive but rather synergistic and interdependent. Ultimately, the research demonstrates that students may not experience respect in school, and this has profound implications for their silences, such as those which are products of educational processes through which students are expected to adhere to silent norms of respect in student voice (see also Hanna, forthcoming). Therefore, student voice and pedagogy are directly connected. Core to the student voice discipline is the concept of respect for the child, but this concept requires examination and exploration that goes beyond conventional and superficial meanings. In order for a pedagogy based on respect for students to be possible, it is first necessary to probe the concept of respect, as this examination of silence in student voice demonstrates that respect is understood and conceptualised differently by students and teachers, respectively. Only once this term is critically examined by both students and teachers can we arrive at practices of teaching and learning which are at once participatory and respectful.

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