Book Review of Sandra Leanne Bosacki, "The culture of classroom silence" (Peter Lang, 2005)

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One of the most frustrating and disconcerting classroom phenomena is the silence among some preadolescents and adolescents who will not or cannot actively engage in classroom discourse. Dialogue or voice is the basis of most classroom activities, and it enables students to share their thoughts and experiences with other students and the teacher. Without dialogue, there is likely to be “deafening silence” that could be undesirable or detrimental to classroom life. Is silence desirable or undesirable? Sandra Leanne Bosacki attempts to answer this question by exploring meanings of silence, theoretical and conceptual foundations associated with silence and goes further to explore classroom implications and programs that can assist preadolescents and adolescents to get voice and to utilize silence productively.

Whatever drives adolescents to silence, withdrawal, fear of engaging in dialogue, or reluctance to contribute to discussion and enquiry in the classroom deprives them from sharing their knowledge and experiences, and simultaneously, denies the teacher and other students from benefiting from the diversity of ideas that are likely to emanate from the students’ experiences. Silence among adolescents could disrupt and interrupt the dialogical situations that transform classrooms into caring and compassionate communities. *The culture of classroom silence* is a book that makes a significant contribution to promoting schools/classrooms as loving and caring social environments by advocating students’ voices and diversity of social and cultural representations. The author presents an extensive and in-depth literature review that explores meanings and causes of silence among preadolescents and adolescents. Bosacki demonstrates her commitment to cultural sensitivity by exploring different social and cultural settings and contexts that have effect on silence and voice. If not considered contextually, the meaning of any silence is inherently ambiguous and subject to misinterpretation and misjudgment. This highlights the need for educators and researchers to carefully and sensitively handle adolescents’ silence and silent situations in classrooms. Thus, the author attempts to impress on how teachers and researchers can contribute to creating school/classroom situations that are adaptive to social and cultural heterogeneity that exists among students. Consequently, the book is embedded in psycho-cultural theoretical and conceptual underpinnings to explore the dynamics and problematics of silence. Since educators have to deal with “silent students”
every school day, the book should be a very essential and an invaluable collection in their libraries.

Bosacki begins the book with a preface that makes an interesting reading. The preface discusses the author’s experience of silence during her adolescence, and how the negative silence and the “silent treatment” from teachers and peers had impact on her. In her own words she states, “I learned that speaking made you vulnerable to criticism and judgment, so across most contexts, it was safer to remain silent and to listen to others. As a child, I derived exquisite pleasure from the belief that no one could read my mind. My thoughts were my own; my imagination was private” (p. xiv). These words aptly echo every adolescent’s experience during adolescence, the fear of being evaluated and criticized, which seems pervasive during that period and well after. The preface is a vivid and unique presentation that locates the book within the author’s personal “biography”. In addition, most readers are likely to identify and recall their own childhood or adolescence experiences of silence encountered during social interactions, both in and out of the classroom. The book can be viewed as a self-portrait of the author since in part reflects her own historical, social and cultural experience. The power of silence discussed in the book stemmed from the author’s childhood experiences which she states, “As a child, I was always enthralled with the power of silence, the effect it seemed to have on others, regardless of the context” (p. xiii). The cited texts from the preface seem to be the driving force behind the authorship of the book. Similarly, the author has employed much of her experiential knowledge as an educator and researcher to highlight the importance of perception sharing in understanding silence among adolescents.

Besides the well-written and revealing preface, Bosacki initiates the silence discourse by giving a synopsis of the culture of classroom silence in the introduction section. The introduction throws light on the contents, the thrust of the discussion, and rationale of the book. The author poses effective questions to problematize the existing discourse on classroom silence and highlights the presentation approach applied in the book and how the book is organized in four chapters. The culture of classroom silence is written drawing from psycho-educational research and holistic educational philosophies, thus making it analytical and practical. The four chapters focus on meanings of silence, causes and characteristics of classroom silence, cases of classroom silence and their educational implications, and the pragmatics of silence. The structure of the book and the way the ideas are presented make the discussion flawless and integrated, thus making theoretical, conceptual and practical discussions and arguments easy to follow. However, there are instances when there appears to be overlap of ideas in these chapters, which could have been a deliberate effort by the author to emphasize and reinforce her arguments. The merging of theoretical, conceptual, experiential and research discourse provides a balanced presentation of the argument around the theme of silence.

In the first chapter, the author reviews extensively the meanings of silence in relation to social cognitive development and/or psychosocial development. The chapter provides what the author calls, “a road map to some of the meanings and definitions of silence” (p. 3). The author critiques and discusses psycho-cultural theories and approaches on silence among preadolescents and adolescents. She also demonstrates the link between cognitive development (the mental and emotional states of adolescents) and the effects of social and cultural contexts and situations on silence. Bosacki cites extensive literature to show how social relations that
determine silence and voice are culturally-determined. She discusses how cultural expectations and cultural scripts acquired through socialization influence the development of self-expressions, emotional autonomy, the inner and outer voices which are vital in developing a “connected mind, voice and emotion” (p. 6). The author presents research-supported evidence to illustrate how cultural and social relations impact on cognitive and psychological developments of preadolescents and adolescents. The argument on the effect of socialization on the development of personality is also noted by Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001) observe that individuals typically use their own cultural expectations and scripts to approach others and these are in part, from our ingrained cultural socialization experiences. On the effect of culture, including school culture on the development of adolescents as psychological beings, Bosacki notes that various cognitive and epistemological theories, and research may shed some light on the wealth of findings from psychosocial studies that show a significant drop in self-worth, a loss of voice, and an increase in reflection and self-conscious emotions. She displays substantial evidence from the reviewed literature that shows a strong relationship between culture and socialization, and the development of social cognition. For instance, the author cites Bruner (1996) who concludes that children internalize parental orders (parental voices) and interpret the messages in the orders, and this internalization of parental instructions has both a conceptual and a moral contingent that may shape the experiences of adolescents in the classroom in relation to their interaction with the teacher.

Bosacki ably draws our attention to well-researched social and cultural situations that can lead to diverse definitions of silence. She posits that silence may be: 1) a sign of rejection, 2) fear of social evaluation, 3) a feeling of invisibility, 4) expressing social disinterest, and may also imply 5) intense intellectual engagement. Although language competence is essential to voice, Bosacki feels that social and cultural factors such as race, ethnicity, gender and social class are determinants of the silence/voice dichotomy. Cognitive representations and narrative thought are articulated through social communication, and language is vital to this process. However, the language that is applied in social communication is cultural-specific and dependent on the gender, race, ethnicity and social status of the people interacting and the social circumstances leading to the nature of dialogue engaged in. These attributes are well articulated in this chapter and the subsequent chapters. Stereotypes based on these cultural factors influence adolescents’ self-perceptions and feelings of self-worthy within social and school/classroom contexts. The author argues convincingly that social conventions or sociolinguistic behaviors play a vital role in imposing both what she terms, strategic/self-silence and structural silence.

Bosacki presents Olson and Bruner’s (1996) four models of the learner’s mind to illustrate the mental states and processes that are involved in constructing knowledge. The models describe the learner/adolescent as the doer, the knower, the thinker and the knowledgeable expert in knowledge processing. These models are instructive and may be of pedagogical importance to educators who teach preadolescents and adolescents. The models identify perceptions of adolescents at different stages of learning and knowledge processing. The author, concurrently, presents Belenky et al.’s (1986) five different epistemological perspectives which list silence, received knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing, and constructed knowing as complementing the four models in knowledge processing. This chapter is a wealth of research that is conceptually and theoretically informative, especially to educators and
researchers who desire to engage in dialogical conversations that empower adolescents by granting adolescents their subjective and objective voices. The author encourages educators to create socially and culturally connected classrooms that foster students’ voices by promoting both critical reflection and self-expression.

In chapter two Bosacki employs “theory of mind” to explore the root causes of personal and social silence. She draws from a wide range of “theory of mind” research and developmental sociolinguistic literature to describe the impact of classroom silence on adolescents. In discussing theory of mind research she makes connections between the thoughts, intentions, beliefs, desires and emotions of individual adolescents and those of their peers. According to Bosacki, theory of mind research focuses on interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships in constructing psychosocial identities and understanding of multiple and contradictory intentions of others. Interpersonal and intrapersonal sensibilities build a sense of identity in preadolescents and adolescents. The author associates theory of mind with the ability to read others’ mental states in the context of social action. It is this ability to read others’ mental states that enables adolescents to understand others’ intentions vis-à-vis theirs and consequently, enhance communication. Some of the reasons, identified in the book, why adolescents are reticent to engage in dialogue include, low self-esteem, fear of being ridiculed if they are judged to have given inappropriate contributions, cultural differences based on gender, race, ethnicity, and social class, avoidance of conflict, and communication apprehension.

Bosacki regrets the paucity of adequate literature on theory of mind, primarily “concerning sociocultural issues such as gender, social class and ethnicity” (p. 45). Sociocultural factors give identity to adolescents and may act as constraints to their voices. Bosacki further explores methodological and ethical issues that should be considered when researchers study silence among a diverse group of adolescents within school contexts. She warns researchers of the need to incorporate sensitive cultural models, meanings and practices, and transcultural explanatory frameworks. These cultural models and transcultural frameworks will assist researchers to make sense of silence in diverse classroom situations. Social-cultural factors such as gender, social class and ethnicity create conflicting emotions in adolescents that may lead to experiences of silence. On one hand, the author engages in an in-depth discussion on how gender, and /racial/ethnic expectations and stereotypes negatively affect the development of social competence, self-perception and complex emotions, and expressive dialogue among boys and girls. On another level, Bosacki does not view silence as detrimental to classroom lives. She suggests that silence provides adolescents with opportunities for self-reflection, “developing a stronger self-connection and an increased sense of spiritual and self-awareness” (p. 65). She also argues that silence allows students to listen to their inner voices, thus increasing a sense of self-worth and self-understanding. However, as Bosacki advises, more research needs to be conducted to determine how culturally structured practices and social interactions in classrooms foster self-reflection in adolescents.

In chapter three, the author discusses at length sociocultural factors that contribute to the classroom silences experienced by adolescents. In terms of learning exceptionalities, Bosacki views status variables such as ethnicity, gender, and social status as contributing to social cognition. Through reviewing various studies, she confirms that silence is culturally specific, that is, different cultures impose cultural scripts and cultural appropriate behaviour which may
determine when an adolescent can speak or listen. Different societies have also social positions, personal relationships and social hierarchies that may regulate adolescents’ interactions and how they express their spiritual voices in social groups or within classrooms. In this chapter Bosacki also explores how gender affects stereotypic gender-roles and behaviour. With illustrative examples, she describes in detail how gendered silences are outcomes of gender differences in emotion understanding and experiences acquired during gender socialization. Her sentiments are expressed and reinforced in the following statements,

As adolescents explore their sexual selves, they engage in sexual scripts. These scripts are stereotyped patterns of role prescription for how individuals should behave sexually....Differences in the way females and males are socialized are expressed in the sexual scripts adolescents follow. Discrepancies in male/female scripting can cause problems and confusion for a developing sense of self. (p.107)

To overcome these stereotypic obstacles, Bosacki stresses the importance of developing a psycho-cultural perspective on gender and literacy that integrates the cultural, social, and historical with the psychological to institute change both within-cultural individual differences and between-cultural variations across cultural groups. The loss of voice experienced by girls due to gender differences is similar to the loss of voice experienced by adolescents from lower social classes and from minority ethnic groups. This section of the book is very instructive to educators and researchers who work with vulnerable adolescents. The chapter reveals the intricacies and complexities linked to prejudice, power, marginalization, and identity of adolescents belonging to diverse backgrounds. The author provides empirical evidence from Western European and North American contexts to show how social and cultural factors promote different social treatments of adolescents from different cultural backgrounds. Through the review of literature and research studies, the author highlights the need for educators to engage in cross-cultural and intercultural perspectives that reduce instances of silent contexts within classrooms. The discussion on engagement in dialogue is carried over into chapter four.

In chapter four, Bosacki gives details of communication strategies and skills that educators can apply in classrooms with adolescents to foster dialogic discourse. Dialogic discourse analysis offers the powerful capability of examining both oral and written language within a common framework, and investigating their relationships and effects on each other (Nystrand, 2001). Bosacki admits that many classroom programs focus more on academic competence than on adaptive functioning and psychological well-being of students. In this regard, the author suggests specific classroom situations that educators can apply to foster holistic curriculum models that “foster the development of a positive relationship between the body and the mind” (p. 137). Some of the classroom activities that are meant to engage adolescents into active dialogic participants include, story-telling/narratives, role playing, and critical dialogue/discussions on mindfulness. Bosacki concludes that by engaging in these activities adolescents will develop “silence sensibilities” that promote the development of self-knowledge, social understandings, moral understandings, pro-social behaviour and spiritual connectedness. These attributes are necessary for a holistic curriculum that focuses on the development of the whole child.
Bosacki’s idea of a holistic curriculum is similar to the constructivist philosophical paradigm on knowledge construction. Both a holistic and constructivist curriculum, give voice to learners and view students as co-constructors of knowledge and as effective participants in the co-creation of the curriculum. As noted by the author, co-constructors of knowledge enables preadolescents and adolescents to develop self-knowledge and to challenge imposed existing cognitive constructions of the self and others. A holistic curriculum is described as relevant in assisting students to make self-connections, develop a greater self-understanding, foster self-expression and self-competences. As her common thread throughout the book, Bosacki advocates a psycho-cultural approach to schooling that provides a discursive space that allows students to negotiate their cultural differences and self-identities. A psycho-cultural approach promotes multiculturalism that creates caring, connected and welcoming classrooms. In Bosacki’s words, classrooms can become loving and caring environments.

By offering genuine engagement to our students, [so that] they can begin to experience interconnection and wholeness, which in turn allows them to co-create environments where they interact with their peers in similar ways. As co-participants in learning communities, we can begin to teach and model together the practices of openness, awareness, tolerance, respect, kindness, and trust. (p. 86)

The focus in such classrooms is not on academic achievements measured by attainment of scores but through the art of cultivating meaningful human relationships. As argued by the author, the focus is on dialogue, connection, and the mutual creation of meaning and understanding.

Overall comments

The book raises a lot of unanswered questions and pertinent issues that require further research. Aside from being a well-researched text, the strength of the book is in its probing questions and its challenge to educators and researchers. In every chapter the author draws our attention to paucity of research in the area of silence and its related consequences. The author raises complex issues that have not been addressed through available literature and research. Consequently, she challenges educators and researchers to explore these areas in order to be able facilitate positive use of silence in the classrooms. For instance, Bosacki encourages research that will determine whether “wireless” classrooms invite respectful conversations and/or create new silences. She also suggests future research on spirituality in schools to focus more thoroughly on issues of gender, power, and identity within the context of various cultures. These are some of the many gaps in the research on silence that she feels need to be looked. In addition to these gaps are research themes on spirituality and emotionality in the classroom, self-perceptions of exceptional adolescents and classroom silences, and gender-role identities and religiousness, and silence experiences. The author admits that there is inadequate research to answer most of the questions raised in the book and that theory of mind cannot adequately explain all the issues raised without supportive research evidence. Further research should also investigate the connections between spirituality, self-cognition, individuation and
individualism. Understanding these connections within theory of mind research will reduce the complexities of silence and silencing situations. Silence is a very disturbing feature of classroom life that needs to be adequately researched and addressed.

An interesting feature of the book is that it addresses a phenomenon that every reader has experienced during preadolescence and adolescence. Not only is silence experienced in adolescents’ classrooms, but also in postsecondary classrooms. Cultural factors such as gender, social class, race and ethnicity cut across all educational levels, and every reader of this book has experienced silencing situations at some stage during the reader’s school life. Subsequently, while reading the book, the reader can identify with some issues raised by the author, how our own cultural values affect how we communicate and interact with others, how we are silenced by others and also silence ourselves when we are in unfamiliar social and cultural situations in which we fear being evaluated or judged. This thought-provoking and reflective book presents silence as a result of deficiencies in cultural understandings and promotes a psycho-cultural perspective and framework for understanding adolescents and the impact of culture on communication in schools and classrooms. The book further helps educators and researchers to develop mindful intercultural communication skills that promote dialogue among students.

Another important characteristic of the book is its relevance its audience. The book is a multidisciplinary text that draws from the research work of a variety of disciplines such as cross-cultural psychology, social psychology, sociology and education. The culture of classroom silence will appeal to a cross-section of students, educators and researchers who work with adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds. The book is also written in an easy-to-read manner, although in some sections classroom teachers may find difficulty in following some conceptual and theoretical jargon used. Throughout the book, practical classroom implications, and constructive guidelines to fostering voice and positive silence are outlined and clearly explained. Thus the book is an invaluable text for teachers who are in pursuit of creating and recreating classrooms that engage students in inter-subjective dialogue and educational programs that draw on other cultures to build an integrated, and transformational learning model. Finally, the book has a list of references for recommended readings. References are essential to educators and researchers who are interested in studying “silence” and its classroom impact or silence in multi-contextual situations. In addition to the references, the table of contents is well-organized and gives abundant detail at a glance.

References


**About the Reviewer**

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Edward Shizha is a Research Associate at the University of Alberta in Canada. He obtained his PhD in Sociology of Education in 2004 at University of Alberta. His dissertation examined the role of indigenous knowledge in the teaching of science in primary schools in Zimbabwe. One of the findings was the silencing effects of academic curricular that negate the cultural backgrounds of students. His research interests include culture, ethnicity, race, and multiculturalism; society, social stratification and social change; immigration and social support for immigrants; indigenous knowledge and inclusive school curricular; and educational equity and opportunities for the vulnerable groups in society.

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