

Commentary

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Uncovering Silences in the Field

Abstract

Situated within the classroom's literacy context, the current paper examines children's silences within formal pedagogy, informal peer interactions, and research activities. The episodes highlight that silences are an outcome of a school culture based on social and cultural hierarchies, with caste as a significant factor. The meaning of children's silences and its effect on the research process is discussed. In conclusion, the importance of noticing silences in the field is discussed.

Keywords: Silence, literacy, caste, school culture, peer group

Introduction

Silence is often seen as a sign of inertia, disengagement, and inactivity. However, silence can hold many meanings. In the context of school and its literacy practices, silence is intertwined with relations of power, with voice as a dominant mode of agency (Spyrou, 2015). In teacher-student interactions, silence is framed around the discourses of identity and beliefs (Schultz, 2010). For example, in a teaching-learning activity, teacher demands students' silence to observe and learn. Here, silence becomes a pedagogical tool (Creely & Waterhouse, 2024). In return, students' silence represents compliance and order, while voice represents non-compliance (Schultz, 2010). The silence is broken when the teacher expects students' talk as a form of participation. Silence in this situation, from a teacher's perspective, may mean lack of attention or understanding. Sarangapani (2003, 2020) in the context of India has also argued that children within a cultural pedagogy of memorisation and textbook-based learning are often expected to be silent and learn by training their attention on what constitutes knowledge in the classroom. Literature points at the systematic silencing of marginalised students not just in Indian classrooms (Nayak, 2023), but across the world (Schultz, 2010). Thus, silence, in relation to voice, produces a relational conundrum that sustains and resists normalising narratives (Karmiris, 2023).

In the current paper, “silences” are discussed within the context of a literacy-based qualitative case study situated in Warangal, Telangana. The study was multi-spatial in nature, spread across children’s neighbourhoods, the researcher’s home, children’s homes, religious institutions such as the church, and the virtual world. For the purpose of the current discussion, I discuss observations and its relation to silence at a low-fee private school. All four focal children of the study, i.e., two girls and two boys, were studying in Class VI at Victory High School.¹ They belonged to historically marginalised communities (such as Scheduled Caste, Other Backward Classes) and were also a religious and linguistic minority.

Telugu was the dominant language of the classroom. English, Hindi, and Dakhini were also used among children. I did not speak Telugu, but in a multilingual context, children often used translanguaging (García, 2017) as a resource, borrowing syntactic structures and words from Telugu, English, and Hindi to communicate with me.

Unlike a standard and abstract conception of literacy situated within the school that conceives “reading and writing as the technology of the intellect” (Street, 1984, p. 65), in the current study, literacy was conceptualised as a social practice where children’s differentiated resources within their communities—such as symbols, objects, affective relationships, identities, activities, and children’s movement across their literacy contexts— influenced their processes of literacy and the meaning they made within it. The research aimed to explore the modalities and other literacy resources that children used within their varied contexts to make meaning, and the nature of this meaning within children’s literacy practices.

For the purpose of this enquiry, I wanted to observe children’s talk, discussions between the teacher and children, and the use of objects or gestures and conversations between peers. However, in the course of my fieldwork at school, I encountered silences marked by power relations that defined the school culture and its interpersonal relations, which in return affected my access to participants, the spaces of our conversations, and the focus of this research. Inequality and power relations either in the field or between researcher-participant positionality is a common occurrence that qualitative researchers have to often navigate in an inherently unequal society such as India (Parameswaran, 2001; Chacko, 2004). In this

¹ Pseudonym.

discussion, I detail the nature of silences that characterised literacy practices in the school, the way power operated within interpersonal relations, and how as a researcher I navigated them to reasonably respond to the research questions.

The Field: Noticing Silences

I began my fieldwork in January 2022 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the changing school-opening guidelines during this period, I selected a school close to my house for easy accessibility. After I received permission from the school authorities, I began to observe the online and in-person classes for Classes VI and VII and interact with the children. My language limitations guided my choice of the subject classes I could observe.

Episode One

After a few English and Hindi class observations, I noticed that all teachers had a pattern of teaching. They would ask children with good reading skills to read part of the text, which they followed with an explanation, after which they moved on to the next child. In between, the teacher asked factual questions randomly to a child to check if the children were attentive. To such questions, the teacher expected one or two-syllable responses. Children who were unable to respond were reprimanded. Children only spoke when asked to; other times, they were expected to learn while being silent. However, in Class VI, a few girls (Seven-Star Girls)² deviated from this pattern. They spoke out of turn and sometimes went beyond the expected responses. The teacher tolerated their responses and said nothing. Once regular school began, I developed a rapport with children and narrowed my focus to Class VI.

Episode Two

In between classes when there was no teacher present, a few children asked me questions on my appearance, marital status, religion, and caste. The Seven-Star Girls asked me penetrating and invasive questions, such as “Do you go to the temple?,” “You do not look married,” “What does your husband do?,” and “Where is he from?”. After I responded to their questions, they began distancing themselves from me. I also observed that, in the absence of the teacher, the Seven-Star Girls began disciplining the class. They got their peers to finish their incomplete

² The girls had a group name for themselves. For reasons of anonymity, I have used a pseudonym. The use of “star” here is metaphorical and represents not only the way they were treated in school, but also their own perspective of themselves, i.e., being better than anyone else.

work; they reprimanded them for moving around in class or making too much noise. One day when a scuffle broke out between the Seven-Star Girls, a boy, and other children, I intervened and held the class monitor accountable. The Seven-Star Girls and I had an argument, after which a few girls from the group refused to participate in any of the shared research activities.

Episode Three

My research tools involved getting children to draw their house or family, write a letter, or describe an incident. Children who had houses of their own drew them elaborately, highlighting the many plants, the balcony or entrance, and windows of their houses. Others drew standard houses with conical roofs, a square base, and a window. When I asked children making standard houses if it was their house, they replied it wasn't. When I asked if they could draw their own house, I was met with silence. In case of writing-based research tools as well, children often showed no interest or excused themselves, citing other reasons. I finally decided to experiment with the tools, co-constructing them with children.

Episode Four

Five to six children from diverse backgrounds (including the four focal children) continued to participate and interact with me. However, the Seven-Star Girls disrupted the research activities by making noise in the class and mocking children who performed or participated in the activities. Nevertheless, the participating children negotiated the palpable tension and microaggressions in their own way. Sometimes, when they were unsuccessful, they quit the research activity. I was surprised at the authority the Seven-Star Girls enjoyed compared to other children in class. Why did other children listen to the Seven-Star Girls? Why did they enjoy so much power in class? Why did the teacher not reprimand them for speaking out of turn? Why did these girls stick together?

Episode Five

One day, I got a video camera to class to record³ the conversation and performances of children I was working with. The Seven-Star Girls looked at us, i.e., the participating children and me, expectantly. One of the girls came to me and requested that their group wanted to perform for the camera. As an adult, I wanted to be fair to all children and immediately agreed. However,

³ Permission was taken from school authorities as well as from individual children being recorded for this purpose. A field note was used, when children did not give consent to audio or video record.

I suggested that they do this the next day as I had committed to record other children on that day. The group agreed and this immediately changed our dynamics. The Seven-Star Girls now supported us—they even helped in reducing the classroom noise so that we could hear each other.

In the meantime, I noticed that Anupriya⁴, who had developed a close bond with me, was crying. She did not like me favouring the Seven-Star Girls and was disappointed. I tried to talk to her, pacify her, but nothing worked. I asked other girls to help me explain my position as an adult to Anupriya. Over the next few days, I began to notice divisions in the class—there were groups of children who did not interact with each other. I also witnessed a great deal of talk, movement, and initiative by some children such as the Seven-Star Girls, while others such as Anupriya spoke to me alone or among peers they trusted, or they used me as a support to negotiate with their peers.

As I spent time in the field, I began to uncover the meaning of silences and the many questions they pose. I describe my discoveries in the next section.

Discussion

To listen and decipher the meaning of silences within a literacy context requires a system-level understanding of the school, its pedagogy, interpersonal relationships, and macro-level discourses that shape the practices of literacy and silences within it.

In cultural pedagogy-based (Sarangapani, 2020) literacy practices of the school, the teachers in the school used silence—as detailed in Episode One—not only as a pedagogical tool (2003), but also as a form of maintaining compliance and order in the classroom (Schultz, 2010). Nevertheless, consequences for non-compliance were not the same for all children. As Episodes One and Two highlight, Seven-Star Girls' proximity to their teacher and their relative authority in the classroom shielded them. These girls' differentiated position was the consequence of a number of factors. First, since the school that hired comparatively lesser teachers than required, the girls alleviated the labour of overburdened teachers, acting as proxy teachers. Thus, children were often left alone in the hands of class leaders or monitors (such as

⁴ Pseudonym.

Seven-Star Girls) who managed the class and got students to finish their homework. In return, the teacher yielded her authority to these leaders by listening to their complaints and reprimanding, hitting, or punishing other students in class who disobeyed them. This led to fear among children and gave the class leaders authority over them.

Second, the criterion to be appointed as leader was to be among the first five rank-holders of the class. However, at least two students in the class who held the second and third rank did not get any leadership roles since they belonged to Other Backward Classes and Scheduled Caste categories. All the class leaders shared the same caste and religion as the teacher and were economically better off than their peers. Given the differentiated authority between the Seven-Star Girls and their peers, the meaning of children's silence and its purpose changed based on the children's social positions. For example, although the silence-based pedagogy of the classroom was supposed to apply uniformly to all children, the teacher tolerated the Seven-Star Girls' defiance and voices.

In addition, as Episodes Two, Three, and Four highlight, the Seven-Star Girls were able to use their voice not only to express themselves and discipline peers but also to disrupt and silence participating peers from historically marginalised communities. Overall, this highlights a school culture based on inequality and power relations where caste plays a significant role in systematically shaping who gets to speak and who is silenced (Nayak, 2023), i.e., who is not provided a safe and conducive environment to speak.

The Seven-Star Girls also used silence as a form of agency (Spyrou, 2015), refusing to engage or share their lifeworld with me as a researcher, thus challenging and refusing to accept any power that I may have held as an adult, in the situation. The girls also understood the value of silence and its importance, especially for a meaningful audio or video. Thus, they engaged in trading it as a commodity, as seen in Episode Five, in exchange for their demand to be included, enabling me to carry on with my research activity in a less noisy environment.

The silences of other children also suggested a form of agency, but a hesitant kind, accompanied by inhibitions, powerlessness, or the feeling of being judged. For example, in Episode Three, when children who drew standard houses refused to make their own houses, or in Episode Four, when participating children left the research activity because they were unable to negotiate with their peers. This highlights the limitations of an individualistic idea of agency,

especially for children at the margins who are subjected to systemic silencing, since it gives credence to the notion of agency as an outcome of relational interconnections (Raithelhuber, 2016).

The methodological silence in Episode Three pointed to the non-suitability of research tools such as talk, drawing, or writing within the Indian context, especially in a low resource educational context, although they are used in international studies of social literacy (Heath, 1982; Rowsell & Pahl, 2007). Drawing and writing had acquired “work” or “task”-like meanings within the school’s standard pedagogical practices. These methods did not lend themselves to any meaningful expression among children. Neither did classroom talk, as it was often discouraged. In the power relations within the classroom, it became amply clear that only children who felt belonging, a sense of worth, and confidence “talked,” while others such as Anupriya did not find the classroom a safe space to express themselves. Anupriya, a Dalit Christian, enthusiastically participated in the research activities. However, even in these conversations, she never spoke about herself, sometimes retaliating by mocking her peers or laughing without expressing anything about herself. In order to understand the social literacy practices of Anupriya, other children at the margins, their peer groups, I engaged children in out-of-school contexts (Kress, 2010).

Conclusion

Uncovering silences and their meaning within the current study on social aspects of literacy foregrounds the importance of examining power relations, hierarchy, and caste, and the way they shape children’s choices, spaces, and modes of expressions. It also highlights the limitations of standard research tools for social literacy in the Indian context, with the need to co-construct suitable tools that focus on children’s differentiated agency and diversity of communication. This can result in documentation of diverse voices that allow a nuanced understanding of the way power relations, hierarchy, and caste affect literacy practices and construct silences in the classroom.

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