**Breaking the Silence – How Speaking Truth to Power can Change Teaching and Learning**

**Summary**

This paper examines the phenomenon of a “culture of silence” in a large urban school board in Ontario as experienced by teachers, former administrators and students. The concept of a “culture of silence” was first introduced through a report presented to the school board by an expert panel examining issues of school safety after the fatal shooting of a young high school student in the hallway of his secondary school in 2007. Upon releasing its report in January 2008, the expert panel offered a multitude of recommendations to all levels of government as well as calling for adequate funding for public education, but it also explicitly named a “culture of silence” as one of the more formidable challenges facing the board in transforming all schools into safe, inclusive and equitable spaces. Thus, as a parent, an educator, an activist and a board employee who had witnessed firsthand such a culture, the urge to examine this phenomenon from various perspectives was very compelling. I developed three research questions to inform a deeper understanding of the phenomenon:

i. How do educators who have worked in this school board and students who have studied within it define and experience a “culture of silence”?

ii. Is the existence and perpetuation of such a culture inhibiting meaningful change in our schools?

iii. Do research and /or qualitative data reveal whether the potential exists to disrupt, mitigate or even eliminate such a negative and self/organizational-limiting culture?

Through a series of confidential, semi-structured interviews with two former school administrators, one current educator and a focus group with four former students (young adults), I conducted a phenomenological study to deconstruct and analyze the “culture of silence” from each participant’s perspective, relate it to current (and somewhat historical) literature, and provide recommendations to begin to systematically address the oppressive board ethos engendered through this culture. These participants applied differing lenses to the study (gender, race, age etc.), different locations (i.e., were situated both inside and outside the system), as well as playing different roles (i.e., principals, students, educators, parents etc.) which gave the research depth in spite of the small sample. The paper was built upon a conceptual framework which included activist teaching for social justice, critical and culturally relevant pedagogy and leadership practices, and anti-oppressive and

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liberatory education. While each participant in the research introduced his/her own unique understanding and experience of a “culture of silence”, all individually agreed that they felt such a culture did indeed exist, particularly at the senior levels of school and board administration, and that its implications were both negative and far-reaching for all stakeholders in the system, including students, parents, educators, administrators and policy makers. It became clear relatively early on in the research that people who had experienced or witnessed a “culture of silence” within their classroom, school or at the central administrative level, felt strongly that such a culture must change if meaningful and transformative teaching and learning are to succeed and students are to flourish, for no one can learn, nor teach, nor lead for that matter, if their environment is not safe, inclusive and respectful. One of the more compelling interviews in my research was given by a young adult who has now graduated and who shared an experience he had with a Guidance teacher at his school when he was younger:

And sometimes you’ve got to look at the people that are in power...some of them don’t deserve to have power, right? They’re in the wrong position to have a say…my guidance lead would tell me, ‘oh don’t think about college, keep to the trades’ or when I said I’m going to university she would say, ‘oh you don’t have the grades for university’…they told me that, after high school, I’m going to die…after high school they told me that I will not have time to go to university… (YA2, 205-211)

This young man came from an area of this particular city where, tragically, black youth do die disproportionately, but the interviewee named what the real issue was here: that this particular teacher had the power (and, I would argue, professional and moral responsibility) to help shape this student’s future yet had already decided that he had no future based on the colour of his skin, and where he lived. No one challenged this teacher about her bias or her assumptions about this student, no one, sadly held her accountable, and, as implied by the interviewee, she (the teacher) had power and he didn’t. The student’s voice was silenced in this process given the power dynamics within the school and the system at large, but he was able to clearly name the issue within this interview and his declaration that, “some of them don’t deserve to have power, right?” resonated with me long after the interview had finished.
In spite of being identified in the Board’s response to the expert panel’s report, the “culture of silence” is still clearly evident four years later according to my findings. Interviewees were able to define and explain how it had impacted them, their colleagues and their students. The students were able to identify how this culture had impacted their school experience and how it had influenced how they saw themselves within the school environment. It became clear that the “culture of silence”, while invisible, is an incredibly powerful and self-perpetuating phenomenon. Some interviewees even felt that it was so deeply entrenched it would never change. During the interviews, a “culture of silence” was generally described as a reluctance or even fear by stakeholders (educators, administrators, students, system leaders) to give alternative perspectives, or speak up in opposition to decisions, practices and policies made by others (including policy makers and senior staff), even when the person felt the decision (practice, idea etc.) was poor, unclear, incorrect or unjust. Interviewees further explained that many people were concerned that if they spoke up they would either be reprimanded or suffer a reprisal, such as not being considered for promotion if/when the opportunity arose, or, in the case of students, disciplined unfairly in the classroom or school office. A few interviewees and academic articles highlighted that vice principals in Ontario are in a particularly vulnerable position when it comes to speaking up as they have no union protection and are not yet in a position of full authority (i.e., principal). In the case of students, the young adults interviewed said they often felt powerless and unable to speak up to teachers such as the guidance councillor due to the unacknowledged but implicit power imbalance and the fear of discipline or reprisal from the staff.

Not surprisingly, a “culture of silence” also manifested itself where issues of race, gender, class, sexual orientation etc. intersect. A current board employee related how she was told explicitly not to speak about issues of race and achievement at a system professional development session even though the disparities in achievement for racialized youth were apparently of huge concern to system leaders because some of the attendees did not feel comfortable talking about race. A retired administrator interviewed pointed out the
blatant disparities in some of the Special Education programs “…. when they look at the demographics of who’s in what programs and …whether those are equitable things and whether it makes sense that a population of 11% of black kids in the city is like 50% of behavioural classes…” (Simon, 239-245). While race, gender, class etc. matter, it became clear that speaking openly about them was not sanctioned.

**Recommendations**

In researching a “culture of silence” in this large and diverse urban school board, it became clear that not only did the culture exist, but that it was very complex and entrenched. What was also clear was that the existence of such a culture negatively impacted teaching and learning both directly and indirectly, and was a powerful force in preventing positive change in schools and across the system. In my research, the findings and recommendations fell under six key themes which often intersected and overlapped: (i) relational power dynamics (ii) leadership (iii) systemic inequities (iv) neoliberal policies (v) size of Board (vi) relationships. For example, while strong, emotionally intelligent and social-justice oriented leadership matters tremendously in how a school’s particular culture is shaped, other forces such as the type of leadership at the central level, relational power dynamics, systemic inequities and the provincial government’s neoliberal policies also intersect with and impact upon this leadership, creating competing pressures that are difficult for this leader, no matter how outstanding, to mitigate at the school level, or to have any influence upon at higher or central levels of the board. So, while some of my recommendations were beyond the direct scope of the school board (i.e., neoliberal policies at the provincial and indeed global levels, especially those which mandate an intense focus on standardized testing), others were very much in the Board’s purview and were designed to gradually shift this “culture of silence” towards a culture of equity, inclusiveness, openness and innovation. In effect, towards a much more open, accepting and curious space where creativity instead of compliance is valued, where a collective high moral purpose is intrinsically understood and upheld, and where self-censorship, fear and silence shift to self-reflection, trust and honesty. This will not be easy. Speaking one’s truth to power never is.

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One of the key pieces will be how (or if) *leadership* (meaning all leaders – from school principals to senior administrative staff to policy makers) in the Board commits to this process. If they wish to change the culture of the Board, they must also take responsibility for setting high expectations and then living them every day – in classrooms, schools and at the central Board level.

**Further recommendations include (but are not limited to):**

- **Senior Board staff in conjunction with policy makers:**
  - Develop a comprehensive plan to implement focussed and concrete changes in Board culture (i.e., professional development including anti-oppressive education, emotionally and socially intelligent leadership skills, relationship building, conflict mediation skills etc.), at the central, quadrant and local levels concurrently, benchmarking the changes to a critical path to reflect progress over time
  - Create small units or groupings of schools whose leaders (superintendents, principals and vice principals) meet regularly to learn about and discuss critical and culturally relevant pedagogy, expanded and holistic student assessment (i.e., resiliency, physical and mental health of students etc.) and develop self-reflective and emotionally intelligent leadership skills; these spaces must be safe and respectful for all and leadership shared
  - Model respectful, inclusive and emotionally intelligent leadership setting the standard for the Board as a whole

- **School leaders, superintendents, educators and school community members:**
  - Working together, the entire school community (parents, students, community members, teachers and administration), should develop a deep understanding of the importance of (respectful) conflict in the change process and ensure all stakeholders have the opportunity to understand and practice it and embed it in the school culture
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- **For the Policymakers:**
  - Model respectful, inclusive and emotionally intelligent leadership at all times, with colleagues, staff, parents and students
  - Adopt clear, direct policy statements that define proactive social justice action and interventions (Marshall & Anderson (Eds.), 2009, p. 170)
  - Addition of an arms-length ombudsman’s office (or an independent Human Rights Department) to uphold human rights throughout the system, including those of students

These are without doubt large undertakings and would require both courage and patience to implement, but for those for whom the death of a child in a school is both unconscionable and unforgettable, the elimination of

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the “culture of silence” in this Board is non-negotiable. It is therefore critical that the ethos of silence and fear is ultimately replaced with a culture of honesty, mutual respect and curiosity. In turn, this will entail challenging leaders and ourselves as educators to reflect on what we feel we can’t (or shouldn’t) say to whom and why, and then pushing ourselves to break those silences and speak our truth to power.

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Urban Education Cohort Blog: http://urbaneducationcohort.wordpress.com/
References


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