Blog Post: At Recent Teacher Forum, Schultz Urges Rethinking of Student Silence

By Susanne Shavelson
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Teachers who think that silent students are not participating in class should reconsider, according to Kathy Schultz, who spoke recently to an audience of about 100 local educators at the Mandel Center’s fifth annual Teacher Forum. There are many ways to think about student silence in classrooms, but all should include an understanding that silence is a form of participation, said Schultz, dean of the school of education at Mills College and author of Rethinking Student Participation: Listening to Silent Voices.

Instead of rewarding speech and penalizing silence, Schultz urged teachers to think in a more nuanced way about how students participate in class. Silent students may be taking time to pause and reflect, be resisting what they are hearing, be using silence as way to feel more in control or just be waiting for a reason to speak. “Silence,” she said, “can give some students time and space for their learning. What would an inquiry stance toward student silence look like? What conditions engender speech or silence for a particular child? We don’t always know which moments are most authentic or important to our students.”

She pointed out that teachers may identify student silence as a problem because they are uncomfortable with it. Some students may come from cultures in which silence is a form of respect or deference, or they may be having trouble at home—another reason why it is important for teachers to understand students’ sociocultural backgrounds and family situations. “Think of silence as a container that can holds all sorts of things,” Schultz said. “This gives us new ways to understand classroom interactions and how silence and speech are interconnected.”

After Schultz’s presentation, teachers worked together to help one another think more broadly about silence and speech in their classrooms. Keeping in mind Schultz’s suggestion that they consider “engaged participation, rather than speaking or not speaking,” they discussed individual students and brainstormed strategies for helping them participate in class in ways that will support their own learning and their classmates’. As Schultz pointed out, “All too often, discussions about silence become discussions about getting kids to talk. But sometimes silence can be an intentional practice in teaching and learning.”