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## AM I CREATING A SAFE SPACE?

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of “safe space” dates back to the 1970s when it was used to describe the physical space where individuals could share their experiences in a safe environment (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019). Though a fundamental requirement of a safe space is physical safety, we should recognize that a learning space that is free from violence, discrimination, harassment, and fear; encourages participation and honest sharing of ideas; is non-judgmental, characterized by respect, and allows risk-taking, promotes healthy, positive and flourishing educational experiences. Academic safe space aims to create an inclusive and effective learning environment in a complex learning environment (Magdola, 2000, p. 94 as cited in Gayle, Cortez & Preiss, 2013). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to ensure peace and prosperity for all by 2030, aims to address various social, economic, and environmental challenges through the essential tenets of diversity and inclusion. In this context, the author in this paper brings to the forefront a very nagging and persistent question for educators asking them to reflect on the question “Am I creating a Safe space?” and recommends strategies for creating that “safe space” for learners.

**Keywords:** *safe space, classrooms, educators, inclusive, sustainable development goals (SDGS), educational experience.*

### INTRODUCTION TO “CLASSROOM AS SAFE SPACE”

Rabindranath Tagore writes in his poem “Where the Mind is without Fear” – “Where the mind is without fear and head is held high; where knowledge is free, where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls; where words come out from the depths of truth” (Gitanjali, Rabindranath Tagore, 1910). True to these words is the concept of a safe space in classrooms where students can freely express their honest opinions and ideas without the fear of being ridiculed or laughed at, where diversity is valued and respected, where every learner is included and his/her needs are met.

The author in this paper has particularly emphasized classrooms as safe spaces and raises the question “Am I creating a Safe space?” asking educators to reflect on this question as they perceive classrooms as safe spaces. Most of the time, classroom spaces are hierarchical and discriminatory in nature, thus promoting exclusion and inhibiting learning. Wagh (2022), describes the classroom as a site of consciousness-raising and thus, a space of transformative politics, and thus such spaces need to be nurtured by educators, students and other stakeholders (Wagh, 2023).

### **Why “Safe Spaces”?**

Wagh (2023) in her paper comments on one hand about the ongoing discussions of the idea of safe spaces in different contexts within institutional spaces and on the other hand highlights the need for a discussion of these issues as experienced and expressed within the classroom. Student campaigns against discrimination have repeatedly raised fundamentally serious questions about the classroom as a space that can replicate power structures that exclude students (Arunima, 2007 as cited in Wagh 2023). Wagh (2023) highlights the lack of attention paid to the classroom dynamics where students and teachers with heterogeneous intersecting identities engage in critical discussions.

The need to provide safe and inclusive learning space is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Goal 4 – Quality Education that seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (The Global Goals, n.d.). One of its targets is to build and upgrade inclusive safe schools to provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all (UN Academic Impact, 2023).

OECD 2022 report demonstrates that education is correlated with most of an individual’s key life outcomes and the levels and quality of education that individuals receive have an impact on society in terms of increased GDP growth, reduced healthcare costs and social spending, and improved social cohesion. The report highlights the importance of an inclusive and safe space in driving human rights, educational, personal and societal gains and enabling diverse students to fight stigma, stereotyping, discrimination and alienation in schools and societies. The importance of the inclusion of diverse students in educational settings has many drivers, spanning from human rights to educational, personal and societal gains. Inclusive education has been shown to provide benefits for all students in improving the quality of education offered, as it is more child-centred and focused on achieving good learning outcomes for all students, including those with a diverse range of abilities (UNESCO, 2009). A carefully planned provision of inclusive education can improve students’ academic achievement, while also fostering their socio-emotional growth, self-esteem and peer acceptance (UNESCO, 2020). The World Bank also argues that equity and inclusion in education are essential for shared prosperity and sustainable development (World Bank Group, 2016).

## What do we already know about “Safe Spaces”?

Gayle, Cortez, and Preiss (2013), in their study on Safe Spaces, Difficult Dialogues, and Critical Thinking, discuss the tensions involved with trying to balance building “safe spaces” and critical thinking capacity and examine difficult moments in the intersection of comfort and evaluation. They have focussed on Magolda’s (2000) four categories for inclusive and effective learning environments, which include (1) respecting students and motivation of critical thinking; (2) practice analyzing complex, difficult topics; (3) peer learning and risk-taking; and (4) support encouraging deep analysis and students are aware of these features of safe spaces, and instructors can leverage this understanding.

Holley and Steiner, (2005), while exploring students' perspectives of “safe” and “unsafe” classroom environments report that students offered a wide range of instructor, fellow student, personal, and classroom characteristics that contribute to the creation of safe and unsafe spaces and place most of the responsibility for classroom environment on instructors. They found that 'the vast majority of students consider the creation of a safe space to be significantly important and that the majority of students perceive that they learn more in such a classroom' (p.61)

Sautner (2008), argues about the lack of consensus and consistency in the usage and definition of safe spaces in schools and the challenge of bringing clarity for educators and teachers about the concept of safe space and translating it into their practices. MacKay (2006) cited in Sautner (2008), shows the association between a safe space and better student outcomes. Sautner’s study explored the factors that contribute to inclusiveness and making the school a safe space. The findings of this case study were similar to previous studies which exhibited connecting factors between inclusive and safe schools. A common vision, commitment, collaboration, and ownership, were a few of the connecting factors highlighted in this study.

Goldwasser & Hubbard (2019) analyze student feedback regarding what creates a sense of inclusiveness and belonging inside undergraduate classrooms. Saunders and Kadia (Cited in Goldwasser, et al., 2019) refer to classrooms as spaces where educators and students work together to create and sustain a safe, supportive environment allowing for freedom of expression. In addition to the feeling of inclusivity, students' sense of belongingness, that is the feeling of being respected, valued, accepted, and cared for, impacts academic outcomes and general well-being. The study highlights the strong impact of educators' words, actions, and pedagogical decisions in creating exclusive classroom spaces. This study meticulously addresses the cost factor involved in creating safe and inclusive classroom spaces and brings to light the fact that financial costs involved are considerably nominal and it’s the time costs that educators require to invest in creating inclusive and safe classroom spaces through

critical reflection on one's pedagogical tools, curricular decisions, and self-awareness/preparedness.

Expanding on the existing literature, the author tries to deliberate on the question 'Am I creating a Safe space? And engages in the discussion about how students would expect this safe space to be. Safe space does not just refer to the comfort in physical space but also expands to emotional, psychological, and social safety, etc. Recognizing the importance of a safe and inclusive classroom space, the author shares from her own experiences, a few examples of unsafe spaces and reflects on ways of creating safe spaces through inclusive curriculum, inclusive teaching and learning and assessment, integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in classrooms.

### **Re-visiting the concept of "Safe Space"- Experiences Shared**

A safe space is not just about comfort, easy-going or pain-free, but much more beyond the simplistic nature of safety. A classroom space can be safe or unsafe based on various dimensions that influence that space. Thus, the space we conceptualize as safe or unsafe is very relative and contextual. There can be elements of intention, use of power, academic rigor, transitional periods, social standing, cultural mismatch, identification process, personality characteristics, physical infrastructure, and intersecting within classroom spaces.

A few examples from the author's experiences of classrooms, where the safety of learners is threatened, are shared. On one hand, we may claim a safe space to be one, where all ideas of students are accepted and no one is challenged or uncomfortable, on the other hand, such safe spaces may result in a non-academic environment that hinders student learning. A conflict-free classroom may not be able to encourage imagination, creativity, and critical thinking thus creating barriers to learning and growth of students. A classroom space embedded with a wide range of diversity of learners from different backgrounds can be manifested with pain, harm, intolerance, lack of safety, and hostility when students' peers express honest views and opinions reflecting contradicting perspectives. Difficult conversations within classrooms challenge student participation and engagement, thus making this space unsafe. Bullying or exploitation can arise out of intention or power and can be either overt or covert. Violent acts like hitting, corporal punishment, cyberbullying, verbal aggression through sarcasm, dominance, labeling students in the classroom, coercive interactions, etc. can be detrimental to safe classroom space. The use of non-verbal expressions through unpleasant facial expressions, body language, and mannerisms are some of the hidden invisible actions of discrimination and violence that are sometimes unintentionally manifested in educators' routine practices. Judgment based on factors like culture, previous experiences, social status, dressing, stereotyping, etc., exacerbates the nature of safe spaces. These are challenges faced by academically, psychologically and emotionally safe classroom spaces.

A student's perspective of being safe is to be free from bias, devoid of fear, emotionally safe, psychologically safe, being included, being respected, being recognized, free from any kind of discrimination (verbal, action, mannerisms, etc.), being treated fairly and justly and of all being accepted and not tolerated.

An academically, psychologically and emotionally safe classroom space is where students:

- feel safe to ask questions, seek clarification and express their thoughts,
- feel safe to share their feelings and express their emotions,
- feel safe speaking up, contributing to class discussions and sharing their ideas,
- are willing to take risks, collaborate, and feel more empowered and engaged,
- can give and receive feedback respectfully, share their opinions, give constructive feedback to their peers and accept feedback,
- can overcome the moments of discomfort involved in thinking, discussing, and listening to others about disputable topics and ideas.

## WHAT CAN I DO TO CREATE “SAFE SPACES” WITHIN CLASSROOMS?

Three broad areas where educators can work in order to create safe spaces in classrooms are: Inclusive Curriculum; Inclusive Teaching, Learning and Assessment; and Integrating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in the Classroom.

### 1. Inclusive Curriculum

An inclusive curriculum is one in which access and participation in courses for all students are taken into consideration (Morgan & Houghton, 2011 as cited in BAG Project, 2020). An inclusive curriculum enables to minimization of barriers and reflects multiple perspectives thus having a positive effect on students' experiences and outcomes.

To have an enriching inclusive curriculum that can enable create safe spaces, we can **use a diverse range of resources**. The course content should be a mix of various kinds of teaching-learning resources like case studies, scenarios, research articles, real-life and practical examples, vignettes, etc. reflecting multiple perspectives and voices of individuals from a wide range of cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds drawing on knowledge produced across the globe. This enables learners to reflect on their own and other's backgrounds and identities, creating an inclusive and safe learning environment.

**Contextualize course materials.** Many times, content in textbooks or reading materials and teachers' voices predominantly reflect and dominate a particular culture or background. The course content may have been developed within a certain cultural and historical context. These contexts and

the underlying assumptions need to be explicitly explained to learners to avoid any kind of value judgment and alienation of learners and students need to be sensitized towards issues or ideologies that may be aligned with ongoing academic discourses. This helps students develop a sense of identity and flourish in a safe and inclusive space. For example, when teachers ask students to identify and name a few scientists or give an option of selecting names of a few scientists from a given list of scientists, teachers need to make conscious efforts to broaden the scope of this exercise to include a wider representation of scientist across the geography. Including women scientists, scientists from various linguistic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, scientists from different states, etc. will help widen the learners' perspectives and identify role models that inspire them.

**Acknowledge any limitations in the representation of course material.** Textbooks, reference books, and course materials sometimes tend to include examples that are quite stereotypic or inherently reflect inequalities. For example, the association between gendered words and achievement, appearance, work, etc. is a very common feature visible in the textbooks in the Indian context. Gender bias, patriarchy, and misrepresentation of women are very prevalent in the textbook illustrations and find their way into classroom discourses. Teachers need to discuss elaborately with students the rationale behind such discriminations or stereotypes and should encourage students to challenge and question the inequalities and stereotypes inherent in the representation of course materials, thus paving the way for growth and a change in the attitude of students.

**Avoid stereotypes in course content and celebrate diversity.** Teachers need to carefully review the course content to ensure that the material does not perpetuate exclusion by engaging with learners and providing them with a wide range of examples through their classroom discussions, presenting problem-based scenarios that reflect equality and inclusivity positively. The teaching-learning process in the classroom should allow students to acknowledge diversity by seeing themselves and others reflected in these curriculum discourses positively and inclusively.

**Increase one's pedagogical knowledge.** Educators should themselves be knowledgeable about the pedagogies that speak to questions of diversity, multiculturalism, multilingualism, inclusion, etc. Collaborating with peers and colleagues specialized in different areas helps broaden educators' repertoire of readings and resources and explore different aspects of inclusive curriculum design and pedagogy to enhance one's understanding of issues, concerns, and topics that may be disputable and questionable.

### **Inclusive Teaching, Learning and Assessment**

Inclusive Teaching, Learning and Assessment refer to how pedagogy, curricula and assessment



are designed and delivered to ensure relevant and meaningful engagement for students by appreciating their differences and views for enriched learning (Hockings 2010 as cited in BAG Project, 2020). Inclusive Teaching and Learning and Assessment helps students to be equipped and competent for diverse working environments, facilitates students' values of an inclusive approach to teaching and particularly, inclusive assessment benefits students by considering their differential and varying abilities (O'Neill, 2011 as cited in BAG Project, 2020).

To have an enriching inclusive Teaching and Learning and Assessment that can enable create safe spaces, we can **reflect on one's own assumptions about students**. Student diversity is a very common characteristic of a classroom. Teachers' assumptions about students' background, ability, prior knowledge, etc. influence teacher-student interactions, impacting students' learning. Teachers should get to know their students and withhold the assumptions or beliefs that they may come up with.

**Set explicit expectations for students.** Teachers should set and articulate the learning aims, objectives and expectations including the assessment criteria to facilitate students' abilities to meet conflicting priorities. Subject-specific or discipline-specific understanding of ideologies and principles need to be explicitly identified and communicated to students to help them appropriate their understanding to the discipline-specific context.

**Build rapport with students.** Teacher-student relationships are very crucial in creating safe and inclusive spaces in classrooms. To strengthen these positive relationships, teacher-student rapport and student-student rapport have to be strongly built in classrooms. Knowing students by name, sharing personal interests and learning process, through group activities, and collaborative exercises, help in building rapport and creating a safe space for students where they can be motivated and feel included.

**Avoid ignoring or singling out students.** Often there are a few students in classrooms, who feel isolated, alienated, marginalized, excluded, invisible or out of the group. Their identities are underrepresented and they encounter unpleasant experiences which in turn have consequences on their performance, their relationships with others and create a very unsafe space in classrooms. Teachers should avoid ignoring and singling out these students and ensure that they feel recognized and included as every other student in the class.

**Conduct a prior knowledge assessment.** Students come with a varied range of prior knowledge, skills, and competencies. It is not conducive to seeing every student at the same level of knowledge and attitudes. This will exacerbate the feeling of exclusion in classrooms. Teachers need to understand every student's strengths and weaknesses to determine the appropriate level of challenge for each student. A pre-test assessment can be adopted by teachers to understand the level of each student and thus tailor the teaching and assessment according to the needs of students. This will also help students understand

their strengths and weaknesses. Prior knowledge assessment thus enables an inclusive classroom space where every student's needs are met.

**Design and facilitate effective group work.** Creating heterogeneous groups of students for group work enables them to work together and engage with multiple perspectives and ideas and also enhances team working capabilities. Teachers should employ strategies to facilitate a collaborative environment and that ensures learning for every student in the group. Teachers need to establish clear expectations in consensus with students, so that they are accountable and responsible in promoting inclusive and respectful interactions amongst themselves.

**Offer a diverse range of assessment methods.** A diverse range of assessment methods like writing tests, oral presentations, creating audio-visual materials, objective tests, quizzes, etc. ensures fairness in the assessment of student learning and reflects the needs and interests of a diverse set of students in the classroom. This also helps create an inclusive space in classrooms where every student can showcase his/her capacities and capabilities.

### **Integrate Social-Emotional Learning in the Classroom**

The foundation of social-emotional learning lies in creating a safe and inclusive environment. Conscious and intentional integration of social and emotional skills has a positive impact on individuals in almost every area of life. To integrate social-emotional learning in classrooms to create safe spaces, we should adopt the following strategies.

**Know your students.** Teachers need to make students feel recognized as individuals by calling them out by names and also providing them opportunities to learn each other's names. Taking the time and effort to learn and correctly pronounce a student's name will make the individual student feel valued and provide an opportunity to model inclusive behavior for all students.

**Responding to Students' Perspectives and Needs.** Teachers need to be responsive to students' needs. This helps in building trusting relationships. Listening attentively to what a student has to say or share, getting to know about students' identities as they perceive them, creating ample opportunities to build and sustain relationships, help in creating a responsive environment and build the structures that support belonging and emotional safety. Students feel valued and supported in school when their teachers are responsive to their perspectives and needs.

**Affirming Student Identities.** Teachers should ensure that the teaching materials, resources, books they use, the examples they illustrate, the images they use in presentations, etc. in class reflect



diversity and give students a feeling of their reflection in these discourses. Students should get opportunities to share their experiences and the diversified experiences can be harnessed in teaching learning. The changing and dynamic nature of identities can be reflected through discussions engaged with students and their extended community of parents and caregivers.

**Establishing Consistent Routines and Procedures.** Establishing consistent rules and procedures helps learners to be aware of expectations from them and thus be emotionally secure. Routines that are created in consensus with students help in the smooth and effective running of classroom procedures and thus enable students to focus on learning. Carefully planned routines and procedures provide opportunities for student leadership and socio-emotional learning.

**Creating space to share what matters.** At times students come across unpleasant experiences from happenings around them. Such events can be very disturbing and traumatizing. Talking to them about it, giving them an opportunity to talk and share what they think about it, and how they are affected by it, helps them to face these and similar events and deal with their feelings and emotions in a regulated manner.

**Normalize feelings.** Recognizing the feelings and emotions of children and helping them understand and be aware of their own emotions ensures their safety and security. Validating students' feelings and making them feel normal helps them share their voices freely about a situation that is bothering them and feel safe and secure.

**Address challenging behavior head-on and use these as teachable moments.** Teachers should not ignore challenging and deviant behaviors of students, as this may tend to create exclusion amongst students. Difficult moments in the classroom should be converted into teachable moments and opportunities for learning. Stressful moments in classrooms can be directed towards useful dialogue by encouraging students to take different perspectives using role play or maintaining reflective journals to write down their thoughts and feelings.

**Teach and Practice Active Listening.** Teachers should practice active listening to support inclusivity. It can help create a space where students feel cared for and can exercise their agency in a learning environment. Appropriate body language including facial expressions and eye contact, practicing reflective speaking skills like paraphrasing, repeating, probing, clarifying and remembering, providing timely and constructive feedback, withholding judgment and being non-judgmental, etc. are a few strategies that provide a space for inclusive dialogue in classrooms.

**Incorporate Collaborative Learning Activities.** Promoting collaborative learning amongst students in classrooms enables them to put away their differences and work together for a common vision, share ideas and use problem-solving, thus enhancing social awareness and relationship skills

amongst them. Students develop the socio-emotional skills of teamwork, communication, empathy, and relationship building through collaboration.

**Encourage Reflection and Self-Assessment.** Students should be encouraged to reflect on their emotions and behaviors to promote self-awareness amongst them. Regular and consistent integration of reflection activities can promote students' socio-emotional development and help them become more mindful of their behaviors and actions.

## SUMMING UP THE CONCEPT OF “CLASSROOM AS SAFE SPACES”

The idea of “Safe spaces” has always been a contested area and been problematic. This is very much in alignment with Sautner's (2008) argument about the lack of clarity in defining safe spaces. How can one conceive or imagine a safe space? In a world that is engulfed with conflicts, violence, war, hostility, terror, etc. there is certainly a strong need for physical safety, but a learning space in education calls for something more and beyond this physical space. There are various elements like psychological, emotional, social, and philosophical aspects, that this learning space constitutes. Educators can kindle the path of a safe space through pedagogical conditions and classroom practices where students can be free from fear, hostility, bias, discrimination, inequalities, injustice and many other forms of marginalization or exclusion (Keys, 2019).

Education is the basic building block of every society and the best investment towards building healthy and equitable societies. Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone has the right to education”. With this article applicable to the universe, safety as a privilege should be made accessible to every individual. Then, how are we imagining these safe spaces, how are we going to create these spaces and what is the challenge of co-existence of these safe spaces within the tensions involved with trying to balance building “safe spaces” and critical thinking capacity as discussed by Gayle, Cortez, and Preiss (2013).

As we have seen, classroom spaces are hierarchical and discriminatory in nature, thus promoting exclusion and inhibiting learning. Wagh (2022), describes the classroom as a site of consciousness-raising and thus, a space of transformative politics and thus such spaces need

to be nurtured by educators, students and other stakeholders (Wagh, 2023). Classrooms are also spaces of diversity, where learners from varied backgrounds, cultural, linguistic, class, and caste come together for learning. It is assumed that a diverse environment or setting is inclusive and this is quite problematic in nature. Lack of openness to diversity or stereotypes and prejudice of both teachers and students can result in negative behaviors and actions (Keys, 2019).

Addressing issues of diversity or inclusion can be difficult in learning environments, as individuals tend to avoid issues that make them uncomfortable. “Safe” in the context of classrooms does not just mean being defended by or defending contrasting views and perspectives; rather it means feeling “safe” to express openly, perspectives and engage in discussions of disputes that may be embedded within curriculum and classrooms or outside of the mainstream discourse. These discourses may be focused on sensitive issues, or arise from the discord in cultural, ideological and personal beliefs and attitudes of either the educators or the students (Harpalani, 2017). In such situations, it becomes difficult for teachers to take any position and compel them to either ignore injustice, inequalities, or exclusion or encourage positive dialogues in the classroom around these issues while maintaining an easy-going classroom environment. Creating safe spaces for difficult dialogues is essential to make learning environments where dominant ideologies are challenged and students grapple with and through "new concepts and challenging social issues at a cognitive level, while they also experience them effectively, either internally or externally" in an inclusive environment (Jehangir, 2012 as cited in Gayle, Cortez & Preiss, 2013; Mayo, 2002). Sometimes, teachers fail to create these spaces without even realizing it.

Classroom spaces provide ample opportunities to students, thus contributing to educational experiences that can enrich the learners. Curriculum experiences with diversity has positive outcomes on student outcomes and this is possible through educators’ intervention and practices within the classrooms and beyond. This is in conjunction with Holley and Steiner’s (2005) findings about students’ perspectives of “safe” and “unsafe” classroom environments, where students place most of the responsibility for the classroom environment on instructors. The author in this paper, while deliberating on the question “Am I creating a Safe space?” suggests to educators, ways of creating safe spaces through inclusive curriculum, inclusive teaching and learning and assessment, and integration of SEL in classrooms.

She elaborates how an enriching inclusive curriculum can minimize barriers to exclusion through use of diverse range of resources, contextualizing course materials, acknowledging any limitations in the representation of course material, avoiding stereotypes in course content and celebrating diversity and increasing one’s own pedagogical knowledge.

She describes how educators through an enriching inclusive teaching and learning and assessment can enable create safe spaces by reflecting on their assumptions about students, setting explicit expectations for students, building rapport with students, not ignoring or singling out students, conducting a prior knowledge assessment, designing and facilitating effective group work, and offering a diverse range of assessment methods.

The author delineates for educators, strategies for integrating SEL in the Classroom like knowing

one's students, responding to students' perspectives and needs, affirming student identities, establishing consistent routines and procedures, creating space for students to share what matters, normalizing feelings, addressing challenging behavior head on and use these as teachable moments, teaching and practicing active listening, incorporating collaborative learning activities, and encouraging reflection and self-assessment.

In recognizing the classroom as a space of vulnerability, the concept of "safe space" has proven helpful yet also potentially problematic. Because what is safe for some is certainly not for others and because "safety" can be a privilege to which not all have access, can safe spaces exist? This chapter interrogates what is at stake in this pedagogical concept, asking: What are our responsibilities as queer educators in creating certain types of environments? In queer pedagogy, should we be wary of a discourse of "safety" that may feed into neoliberal focuses on security and surveillance? What tools can we use to challenge this rhetoric while maintaining a focus on the politics of speaking and being heard within both educational institutions and queer communities?

The paper extends the scope of exploring classrooms as safe spaces at different levels of schooling and in extremely conflict-ridden areas that are highly vulnerable and tend to be more exclusive and unhealthier for learners.

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