Opening the Doors to Learning Through Safe Spaces in K-12 Schools

By Jennifer Gunn

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K-12 schools have long served as a safe space for students. Whether a student is escaping abuse at home, discrimination due to sexuality or race, or overcoming trauma, teachers and schools regularly provide much more beyond academic learning. They also offer therapy, support, and a place of refuge for many, which makes learning possible. Looking at schools as safe, inclusive spaces helps prepare young people for our diverse world, giving them a sense of belonging and support so that they're able to face life's challenges in healthy ways. So let's take a closer look at the meaning and history behind safe spaces.

The history of the safe space

While the exact origin of the safe space concept is unknown, some trace it back to the 1960s women's movement, as a means to create protective spaces for women against violence, and to provide a community to make change. Activist and scholar Moira Kenney notes that "Safe space, in the women's movement, was a means rather than an end and not only a physical space but a space created by the coming together of women searching for community."

The safe space term extended to the LGBTQ community around the same time. A safe place was "where people could find practical resistance to political and social repression," says Malcolm Harris in his historical review of the safe space movement. The safe space movement further extended into calls for intersectionality.

As feminist and LGBTQ communities made themselves heard, so too did the call for these movements to recognize their own institutional racism and to become inclusive and protective of people of color, not merely as part of the whole, but in particular. Today, safe space or safe zone stickers and placards denote that a place, organization, or person is welcoming to all.

Beyond a shield: the safe space in the K-12 classroom

In an article about the controversy surrounding Yale's Halloween costume policy, author Annie Murphy Paul notes that "research shows, a sense of belonging is essential for learning. We humans are social beings, wired for membership in a group." When our mental resources are "devoted to monitoring one's environment for cues of rejection" then they can't be used to comprehend and remember academic content. In the K-12 arena, we must help students feel included, safe, and strong enough to learn.

In providing a safe academic community, we must offer more than a refuge that merely shields a learner from an offending or dangerous mechanism. Our education communities must also provide targeted support, so that students can learn to effectively deal with conflicts, stress, and injustice in order to become successful in the classroom and in the outside world.

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Safe spaces for racial or ethnic identity

A steady barrage of videos showing racial bias, bigotry, and violence on social media are highlighting the rampant and public nature of racism in our nation. According to Clemson University's "Status of Bullying in School" report from 2013, of the 160,000 children bullied every day, 31% are multiracial. Psychologist Morris Rosenberg found that "African-Americans showed high rates of self-esteem when they compared themselves with other African-Americans, but when they compared themselves to white peers, self-esteem levels dropped. In schools, that translated to lower achievement levels."

McKinsey & Company's The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools notes that "Black and Latino students are roughly two to three years of learning behind white students of the same age." Safe spaces in the K-12 sphere can help minorities feel empowered to speak up, understand systemic inequities, and receive the support they need to believe and achieve. Most of all, schools must be authentically inclusive spaces that recognize systems perpetuating oppression in order to dismantle them.

Safe spaces for gender + sexuality

Advocates for Youth states that that 6 – 10% of the young people in your school may be LGBTQ. "Unless your program positively acknowledges their presence and actively affirms their rights and dignity, these young people may feel compelled to keep their sexual identity a secret. Having to keep secret such an essential part of life puts these youth at risk of negative mental and physical health outcomes." No matter your school or organization's stance on sexuality, ensuring the safety, dignity, and rights of all citizens — especially our most vulnerable young people — is essential. All students, regardless of gender or sexuality, have a right to learn safely and inclusively. This includes things like adopting inclusive language, enacting anti-bullying protections and transparent educational content. A safe space or safe zone sticker on an educator's door can signal to students that anti-LGBTQ language and harassment will not be tolerated.

of Preventative Medicine," children of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds experience and are impacted by trauma. Research suggests that between half and two-thirds of all school-aged children experience trauma, as they are exposed to one or more adverse childhood experiences that can be trauma-inducing." Trauma-informed instruction prepares teachers to recognize the symptoms of trauma and to support students through interventions, counseling, and classroom practices. In K-12 schools, safe spaces and trauma-informed practices help students learn to self-regulate and process negative emotions like anger and sadness. They're able to develop long-term, self-management abilities that make room for academic success as they get older.

When we begin with inclusive K-12 classrooms, we're able to provide our students with the tools they need to survive in a complex world.

Jennifer L.M. Gunn spent 10 years in newspaper and magazine publishing before moving to public education. She is a curriculum designer, teaching coach, and high school educator in New York City. She is also co-founder of the annual EDxEDNYC Education Conference for teacher-led innovation, and regularly presents at conferences on the topics of adolescent literacy, leadership, and education innovation.

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