The Importance of Intellectually Safe Classrooms for Our Keiki

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Introduction: Our Flawed System

In my primary school experience, teachers took the idea of "classroom management" literally. As high school students, we would be micromanaged to sit in perfect rows and obey the teacher like a well-trained dog. This reasoning is two-fold. First, sitting in rows and obeying the teacher is how schooling has always been done—it was like this for the teacher, so this idea is already deeply engrained in their minds. Second, things work best when the teacher keep things "easy." Teachers who line students up in rows find it easier to manage them. It is more challenging to create an engaging and contextualized classroom, thus the authoritarian approach to managing students reigns supreme. Classroom management is maintaining "a positive, productive learning environment" (Woolfolk 2013, 473). At the core, managing a classroom should not be about controlling or micromanaging students; rather the foundation should be based on positive student to teacher relationships. In my teacher education program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, I had the awesome opportunity to be mentored under the wing of Dr. Chad Miller, Hawai'i's 2012 State Teacher of the Year, who grounds himself in philosophy for children Hawai'i's framework for learning. In addition, I spent six months learning about intellectual safety and philosophy for children Hawai'i (p4cH) from Dr. Thomas Jackson. Jackson is the founder of p4cH and is responsible for bringing this philosophical framework to Hawai'i's schools. Intellectual safety is a term used in education, specifically in classrooms (kindergarten to the college level) to describe ideal behaviors and aims for classroom culture. Intellectual safety occurs in classroom spaces where "there are no put-downs and no comments intended to belittle, undermine, negate, devalue, or ridicule. Within this place, the group accepts virtually any question or comment, so long as it is respectful of the other members of the circle" (Jackson 2001, 460). Through the mentorship from Dr. Miller and Dr. Jackson, I have come to appreciate the importance of creating intellectually safe learning spaces. Though these experiences were invaluable, I still found no structured way (from beginning to end) to create intellectually safe spaces. In my teacher preparation program and through prolonged teacher observations, I found great lessons but little cohesion towards scaffolding and ensuring students embodied what it means to truly be intellectually safe.

Learning from the Past

The hegemonic structure of school makes it a challenge for teachers to develop intellectually safe classrooms. Hegemonic structure of schools, for the purposes of this study, will be defined as a system that is "rooted in the culture of the middle class and embodies 'best practices' in a universal pedagogy that is supposed to fit everyone" (Ratliffe 2011, 4). It is often seen as obedience, discomfort, and students in lined rows (similar to a graveyard). According to Kaestle, "pedagogy was not elevated to the level of a science" due to the costs it would inflict to the government (1983, 156). Without the development of effective pedagogical strategies for learning (inclusive of relational capacity), it is difficult to break from the cycle of ineffective teaching, thus negatively affecting positive relationships between teacher and student. In the history of our education system, the common understanding of what makes a "good" student would be "punctuality, regularity, attention, and silence" (Tyack 1974, 50). Traditional classrooms have energy that "was intense and rigid—and for the most part deeply uncomfortable" (Odierna 2012, 47). Though there is a time and place for these traits in the classroom, it is not conducive of developing positive teacher to student relationships, which in end, leads towards an intellectually safe classroom.

Historically in Revolutionary America, the essential goals and focus of the public education system was to "prepare men to vote intelligently and prepare women to train their sons properly" (Kaestle 1983, 3–5). Though this may seem somewhat of a farce in today's system, the essential foundation and goal remains the same: to create social stability and a productive citizenry through collective goals over individualistic ones. Though there are noteworthy movements towards putting our students before the content we teach, there are no system-wide initiatives that have the goals to focus on relational capacity. Henry states that the "purpose of school was never to free the mind, rather the purpose was to conform to society's needs and not let creative intellect

get out of hand" (2000, 55). The goals of education, both past and present, have always pointed towards being a moral citizen of the United States, but how can moral citizens work collaboratively without effective relationships?

Intellectual Safety

Intellectual safety encourages respectful relationships, meaningful learning environments, and productive disagreement with the potential to extend beyond the classroom. On the surface, it may seem that intellectual safety is simply about creating a positive environment where everyone is respected, but intellectual safety encompasses a deeper meaning. Butnor asserts that intellectual safety is not simply feeling comfortable; rather it is a "feeling of trust in oneself and one's community to honestly and genuinely engage in thinking" (2012, 29–31). Effective and respectful disagreement does not simply happen in a classroom, it starts with trust and understanding of why disagreement is necessary. Students engaged and invested in intellectual safety may take these skills beyond the walls of their classroom. Thriving relationships and partnerships are essential in and out of the classroom and they are grounded in spaces where stakeholders feel safe to express thoughts and ideas without the fear of judgment or ridicule—creating intellectually safe spaces are not simply a benefit for the classroom, as it is a goal for any human interactions one may be invested in. As a classroom teacher in Hawaiʻi's public schools, I am eager to contribute to the realization of intellectual safety.

This is How and Why We Teach

When I create intellectually safe spaces, students are more excited and willing to come to class and engage in meaningful dialogue and thinking with their classmates. Students look forward to class discussions and engagement with their peers because they know they will not be judged or ridiculed for their thoughts and opinions. They can experiment and engage in the experimental curiosity that we are all born with. Most importantly, students feel welcomed and they feel that they have a safe place to be in school—often high school students do not have a safe physical and intellectual environment at school. At the macro level, I hope to take a step in the right direction to reshape the negative views that our students have of school through the use of intellectual safety.

Intellectual safety is not a "cookie-cutter" step-by-step manual; rather it is a framework that teachers can infuse with their current pedagogical practices. In no way is intellectual safety created to serve as a "know all,

end all" type of lesson where once taught, the teacher will never revisit intellectual safety again. It is not just another tool to add to our bag of "teacher tricks," nor is it meant to be the next buzzword in education that gets one year of hype before the next idea comes around. Intellectual safety is to be reinforced, daily, in everyday classroom practice to fully reap the benefits of an intellectually safe space.

Why Intellectual Safety?

At the foundation, creating intellectually safe learning environments begins with a teacher's commitment to developing positive relationships with their students. Supportive and caring relationships between teachers and students are shown to be beneficial to student's academic and social development (Rimm-Kauffman 2019, 1). Without relationships in the classroom there is no trust amongst students and teachers, thus drying out the ability for contextualization and rigorous thinking to sprout. When students have meaningful relationships with their teacher and peers, they feel intellectually safe and are respected in class. When a classroom is intellectually safe, senses of "trust among the participants" grows "and with it the courage to present one's own thoughts, however tentative initially, on complex and difficult issues" (Jackson 2001, 460).

Alongside student to teacher relationships, there must be a sense of contextualization in the lessons we teach, and this starts with intellectual safety. Zins states "student engagement requires psychological connections within the academic environment (e.g., positive adult-student and peer relationships)" (2004, 61). Fusing with the interpersonal relationships between students and teachers, the connections made between content and student is essential for effective learning to occur. Makaiau and Miller, teacher educators at the College of Education at the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa, believe that the goal of school should be for "individuals to examine their lives and experiences in order to come to a deeper understanding of the world and their place in it" (2012, 10). For this engagement to happen, intellectual safety must be brought to the forefront.

Intellectual safety sets the foundation at the beginning of the school year, inspiring a culture of respect and collaboration. Creating an intellectually safe environment at the beginning of the year will encourage collaborative and inquiry-based learning throughout the school year. Children learn to think by way of hearing others speak and speaking with them (Tharp et al., 2007). Thinking is one of the main goals of learning, and for this to occur, intellectual safety must be in place. The p4cH inquiry process, grounded in Deweyan philosophy,

helps to facilitate student's ability to think deeply and question life's most philosophical issues (Ozmon 2012, 131-133). This process for thinking is grounded in intellectual safety.

Conclusion

As a former public school student, I experienced many initiatives that attempted to "close the achievement gap," but only seemed to check a box as rote memorization that we needed to regurgitate for a grade. Being at the end of my teaching career, I have been introduced to more old initiatives masked in shiny new slang—for example Growth Mindset, General Learner Outcomes, TRIPOD, I-READY, and the SBA. Though well intended, these initiatives are a one size fits all strategy that does not serve our unique student population. We must start by creating intellectually safe spaces of understanding and care. At the core of creating these spaces is the teacher or facilitator taking the philosophy to heart. We must own the idea of creating spaces where our students and stakeholders feel safe and cared for. When teachers make the conscious choice, a choice that is not forced or pushed down their throats, to nurture intellectually safe spaces, then they have fully grasped the purpose of intellectually safety. When taken to heart, intellectual safety will push teachers and leaders to retrain their mind and bring positive culture to the forefront of how we run our classrooms and more importantly, our lives.

In my years of teaching, I found that nurturing intellectual safety is like growing your first plant. A little TLC goes a long way! Some classes will bloom immediately, and some classes may be like a bamboo tree—it will take time for you to see the results of your labor, but when the results come it will be well worth it.

I challenge and invite readers to apply intellectual safety beyond the walls of the classroom. Creating intellectually safe spaces is a skill that can be applied to any profession. Corporate managers at a Fortune 500 company can use intellectual safety to create spaces where employees feel heard and an integral part of the team. Real estate brokers can use intellectual safety to form strong bonds with their team of agents and clients. Beyond work, creating safe spaces can be applied in any environment one may choose. The possibilities with intellectual safety are endless.

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