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Reframing Education and the Classroom as a Safe Space

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Padilla, Lily, "Reframing Education and the Classroom as a Safe Space" (2023). *Art of Teaching Thesis - Written*. 20.

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REFRAMING EDUCATION AND THE CLASSROOM AS A SAFE SPACE

Lily Padilla

May 2023

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in the Art of Teaching
Sarah Lawrence College

Abstract

This paper asks us to reimagine education and our classrooms as safe spaces for children. Children spend at least 1,000 hours a year in schools. They should spend those hours feeling like they have the freedom to dream, imagine, grow, take risks, and make mistakes. Furthermore, everyone deserves to be in a space that welcomes, accepts, and celebrates who they are. This means recognizing who they were, who they are, and who they can become. Children's complex identities and humanity must be recognized in schools to come to know each child fully. When we lead with love, respect, and empathy, we create an environment with those as driving forces for learning and living together. By ensuring that education and our classrooms are safe spaces, children have the freedom to grow into their best selves, the teacher's ultimate goal.

Dedication

Dedicated with love to my mom who leads with courage and care, and all my students who reminded me each day to live with hope and love.

Acknowledgments

I want to express my gratitude to all those that have made me the person and teacher I am today. To my mentor and friend Lorayne Carbon who made the ECC and Sarah Lawrence my second home. To Rue Beckerman who guided me through my journey in the Art of Teaching program and my thesis project with grace and passion. To Denisha Jones who inspired me what education can and should be like which I will forever strive for my classroom to be. To Sarah Mathews who gave me the agency to grow into my values and confidence in myself. To Robin Hawkins who was the first to introduce me to the world of progressive classrooms, and for letting me take home snacks and treats each week. To my don Jan Drucker who got me through a hard first year of college and who inspired me to apply to the Art of Teaching program. To Emily Cullen-Dunn for helping me through student teaching. To my first class who I will never forget, you all taught me to be forever curious and learn all I can from others. To my host teacher Taz Azad who showed me you can lead with strength and vulnerability. To my host teacher Aaron Mace for welcoming me halfway through the year with open arms and showing me kindness and understanding for all. To my clients who showed me the joy of neurodiversity. To my friends who never fail to put a smile on my face and my favorite people to make memories with. And lastly to my family for always believing in me and daring me to be a strong Chinese Latina woman.

Outline

- Title Page
- What is a safe space?
 - In its broadest sense, a safe space is a space where you are free to be yourself. However, it never involves denying another person's humanity.
- Why is this important?
 - Safe Spaces in my life and its impact
 - Schools need to be safe spaces for children because they spend the majority of their formative years at school.
- Creating Safe Spaces in Education
 - Emotional safety
 - Physical safety
 - Academic Safety
- Guiding Values
 - Bell Hooks: Feminist Approach
 - Bettina Love: Bettina Love
 - Carla Shalaby: Communities of Care
- Emotional Safety Overview
 - Strong sense of self
 - Strong Relationships
 - Strong Community
- Honoring yourself
 - Exploring what makes you, you
 - Celebrating what makes you, you

- “School is trying to make people, but these young people insist they are already made. Their families, their communities, their histories, their biology, their preferences, make these children distinctive people already” (Shalaby, 2017, pg. 159).
 - “I come from” poems at Ella Baker
- “When teachers shy away from intersectionality, they shy away from ever fully knowing their students’ humanity and the richness of their identities. Mattering cannot happen if identities are isolated and students cannot be their full selves.” (Love, 2019, pg. 11).
- Impacts on Labeling
 - “Any kind of qualifier can be harmful because who we are is not static” (Iasevoli, 2018)
 - Different types of labels children are given
 - Anna’s Labels (negative)
 - Growing up with “positive” labels
- Exploring and Cultivating Humanness
 - Children need strong relationships and an accepting environment so they can experiment what it means to be a part of this world
 - Accepting Emotions: When Sophie Gets Angry, Really, Really Angry
 - Experimenting with strong relationships: Alexandria and Chloe conflicts
- Honoring Each Other
 - Honoring who you are leads to honoring who other people are
 - Subway Sparrow at Ella Baker
- Schools, Families, and Communities
 - We must bridge the gap between school life and outside life in order to be full life-long learners.
 - Families in the Classroom
 - Mystery Readers at Claremont
 - Field trips/Walking Trips

- Central Park with Ella Baker
- “Abolitionist teaching is built on the cultural wealth of students’ communities and creating classrooms in parallel with those communities aimed at facilitating interactions where people matter to each other, fight together in the pursuit of creating a homeplace that represents their hopes and dreams, and resist oppression all while building a new future.” (Love, 2019, pg. 65).
- Physical Safety Overview
 - The physical Classroom
 - Tone of the classroom
 - Caring Communities
- The Physical Classroom
 - Differentiated spaces
 - Ownership of the Space
 - Displaying Student Work
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 - Example from my life
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 - Preparing the classroom at ECC
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 - Inclusive
- Caring Communities
 - Classroom Values

Reframing Education and the Classroom as a Safe Space

- Classroom Community Responsibilities
 - Examples from Claremont & Ella Baker
- Threats to Caring Communities
 - Expulsion/suspension statistics
- “Safe schools don’t have police; they have love. Human beings feel safe when they know their personhood will not be assaulted by way of marginalization, public humiliation, and rejection. They feel safe when they are accepted, embraced, cherished-even when they mess up.” (Shalaby, 2017, pg. 181).
- Outside Threats
 - Unfortunately they happen, all we can do is be prepared
 - What are some things that teachers can do to make it a little better?
- Academic Safety Overview
 - Socialization of Learning
 - Growth Mindset
 - Contextualized Learning
 - “Children’s academic development and their social development are inseparable. We need to teach children how to think together and live together” (Johnston, 2012)
- Learning is a Social Act
 - Making Space for students to talk
 - Reading at Ella Baker
 - Valuing different ways of thinking
 - Math at Ella Baker
- Growth Mindset
 - “Everytime a student makes a mistake... they grow a synapse” (Boaler, 2016)
 - Anna and Math
- Discovering and Creating Meaningful Learning

Reframing Education and the Classroom as a Safe Space

- Being an active creator of knowledge and skills building
 - Play and work time at Ella Baker
- Incorporating what students care about
 - Historical Fiction stories at Claremont
- Authentic Learning is not linear and does not have a timeline
 - Block building at ECC
- “The key is curiosity, and it is curiosity, not answers, that we model. As we seek to learn more about a child, we demonstrate that acts of observing, listening, questioning, and wondering. When we are curious about a child’s words and our responses to those words, the child feels respected. The child is respected.” (Paley, 1986, pg. 127)
- Closing Thoughts
 - “Having a safe space to imagine and dream and (re)invent yourself is the first step to being happy and successful, whatever road you choose to pursue.” (Bryan)

Process Paper

In the current climate of the United States, everything is politicized. Education is especially politicized because knowledge, critical thinking, and the courage to be yourself are power. Therefore, these traits are seen as threats that must be controlled. Nothing is safe or welcome, from books to history to even the lives of children, unless it is deemed appropriate by those who haven't stepped foot in a classroom in years. The censors and barriers constantly added to the education system are pushing us further from true learning and freedom. The system strips children of the right to think and live freely. After reflecting on my time growing up in the standard education system and then coming to Sarah Lawrence College, I have experienced firsthand what it means to be able to think and live freely. I believe that our public education system can transform into something that allows each and every child to grow into their full selves without the censors and barriers. However, the system cannot change overnight, and I am hesitant to claim that it will change for the better within the next fifty years with all the current pushback. Going forward into my professional teaching career, I wanted to focus on how I alone can shape my classroom into a space where freedom lives. I want to strive to make my classroom a safe space for all. It is what we need most at this moment.

I grew up in a suburb between Denver, Colorado and Boulder, Colorado. Despite Denver being a large city and Boulder being "liberal hippies," I was surrounded by mostly White, Christian, English-speaking traditional families. And being a Chinese adopted girl into a single-parent Latina family, it was easy to feel different. I quickly learned that my life does not even remotely look close to my classmates' lives, so I felt the need to conform and be the kind of person that others expected me to be. They expected me to be smart and ahead of the curve, sweet, and nice, and never cause problems. I swiftly grasped how I needed to think and behave in

order to survive. Memorization was a skill I picked up at an early age and sitting quietly hands folded was a daily practice. After these past years at Sarah Lawrence and in the Art of Teaching program, I just want to go back in time and give my younger self the grace she needed in order to be herself. I needed an environment that made me feel good about myself with people who wanted to get to know me with everything that I come with. I needed my school to be a safe space.

On the first day of the Art of Teaching Program, I went to Observation and Documentation taught by Rue Beckerman. Rue asked us to think about the word “visible.” We took some moments to jot ideas, words, and phrases that came up when we thought about “visible.” As a class, we came up with a long list of words like seen, eyes, clear, hazy, invisible, heard, glasses, light, perceive, etc. After, we discussed the importance of visibility in education and making space for those children who may become invisible to the teacher. Recently, I revisited the concept of visibility and thought about my own experiences and feelings with being visible, invisible, and hypervisible. Invisibility came with the desperation of wanting to be seen, hypervisibility came with resentment of being someone looked up to or down upon, and visibility came with calmness and acceptance. We need to feel visible in order to be safe. Moreover, visibility does not stop at the child. Visibility encompasses the experiences, beliefs, cultures, and communities that shape them. This is clearly illustrated in Carla Shalaby’s *Troublemakers* where she followed four children who were labeled as troublemakers. She learned about their home lives/culture and saw how that clashed with the school culture. At school, they were only seen through the lens of “troublemaker” which became the only lens after a while (Shalaby, 2017). With visibility comes the importance of diversity and community in

classrooms. In order for children to feel emotionally safe they must be visible with their diverse backgrounds and communities too.

Furthermore, looking back on my favorite times in school, they revolved around creating and experimenting with my peers. I felt in charge of my learning and got to bring new ideas that would have otherwise been hidden amongst worksheets. Now being in a classroom as a teacher, I have the opportunity to see how my students learn and grow in different settings. For instance, I have become enthralled with block building. Children can immerse themselves in new worlds while bringing concepts of mathematics, literacy, social studies, and science. My favorite part about working at the Early Childhood Center was watching children come alive with playing, building, and creating together. On the other hand, I have seen children learn through workbooks. My passion and excitement diminished, as well as my students' passion and excitement. My time in this program has allowed me to value the natural ways that humans learn and live. Growing up, I assumed that the ways that my teachers approached instruction was the best way to learn. This is the best way to teach students within a capitalistic system (everything always comes back to capitalism, doesn't it?). However, now that I have seen what education can be, I refuse to partake in a system that doesn't have the students' best interest at heart. Children deserve to have meaningful learning experiences that they are an integral part of. Learning becomes safe when we think about the children and what they have to offer.

The concept of safety has also been on my mind because of the increase in hate crimes, discrimination, and gun violence in schools. Unfortunately, there are some days where I am hesitant to be a teacher because of these risks. However, I have a passion for teaching, and being surrounded by children with all their hopes, ideas, and imagination makes life a little fuller. Focusing on safety in the classroom has helped me figure out what I, alone, can do to make my

classroom a safe space. I cannot reform gun laws or make the government care about educating all students, but I can make my students feel valued and visible. I can give my students opportunities to participate in learning that resonates with them. I can grow communities based in love and care. I can give my students a chance to be human.

All my life I have been on the hunt for safe spaces. I have been in many situations where I haven't felt safe, and thus my humanity was damaged. Even the smallest instance can have a longterm effect. It is easy to forget about one's safe spaces because they are always there; that's what makes them a safe space. Thankfully, I have had the pleasure of reminding myself of them through this project. However, they usually aren't spaces; they are people. My family, friends, professors, teachers, and students show me what it means to create safe spaces and thrive in them. I could not have gotten this far without them nor could I have gone through this thesis process without them. I am eternally grateful for my safe spaces, and I will do everything I can to be that for others.

Additional Quotes

“It did not occur to me that the distractions might be the sounds of children thinking” (Paley, 1986, pg 122)

“The rules of teaching had changed; I now wanted to hear the answers I could not invent myself.... Indeed, the inventions tumbled out as if they simply had been waiting for me to stop talking and begin listening.” (Paley, 1986, pg. 125)

“Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks.” (Hooks, __, pg. 21)

“The brain sparks and grows when we make a mistake, even if we are not aware of it, because it is a time of struggle; the brain is challenged, and this is the time when the brain grows the most.” (Boaler, 2016, pg 35)

“If we isolate the child’s present inclinations, purposes, and experiences from the place they occupy and the part they have to perform in a developing experience, all stand upon the same level; all alike are equally good and equally bad” (Dewey, 1902, pg. 14)

“To begin the work of abolitionist teaching and fighting for justice, the idea of mattering is essential in that you must matter enough to yourself, to your students, and to your students’ community to fight” (Love, 2019, pg 7)

“Our complicated identities cannot be discussed or examined in isolation from one another. These identity complexities, which create our multifaceted range of beings, must matter too.” (Love, 2019, pg 8)

“Intersectionality is more than counting representation in a room or within a group; it is understanding community power, or its lack, and ensuring inclusivity in social justice movements.” (Love, 2019, pg 8)

“A teacher cannot support hateful rhetoric about dark children and their families and still teach them with kindness, love, and care and see the beauty in that child’s culture.” (Love, 2019, pg 18)

“Racism literally murders your spirit. Racism is traumatic because it is a loss of protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance - all things children need to be educated.” (Love, 2019, pg 40)

“Therefore, I learned above all else to protect my dignity. My dignity was never to be compromised, which meant never compromising my voice and my connection to how I mattered in this world. When you compromise your voice, you compromise your dignity. No dignity, no power.” (Love, 2019, pg 44)

“Acknowledging the complexity of identity as a concept, Erikson writes, We deal with a process “located” in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture.... In psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and

observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him. This process is, luckily, and necessarily, for the most part unconscious except where inner conditions and outer circumstances combine to aggravate a painful, or elated, “identity-consciousness.” (Tatum, 2017, ch 2)

“In Eriksonian terms, the person’s inner experience and outer circumstance are in harmony with one another, and the image reflected by others is similar to the image within. In the absence of dissonance, this dimension of identity escapes conscious attention.” (Tatum, 2017, ch 2)

“As we have seen, developing a strong and positive sense of group identity can be a source of psychological protection for members of stigmatized groups, particularly when the exploration of that identity has moved beyond the negative stereotypes to a more accurate and complete understanding of the strengths and assets of one’s group.” (Tatum, 2017, ch 4)

“By encouraging students to adopt a malleable view of intelligence—either through directly teaching students about this perspective or by creating learning environments that embrace the incremental view rather than entity view of intelligence—we can help students overcome stereotype threat.” (Tatum, 2017, ch 4)

“When I speak of a child’s right to freedom, I mean that by virtue of being human she is endowed with the unassailable right not to have any part of her personhood assaulted or stolen” (Shalaby, 2017, pg xv)

“These alternate images allow us to view children as complex and beautiful human beings rather than caricatures of troublemakers. Their humanness encourages us to try to understand their difficult behavior through a more generous lens - a lens that treats troublemaking as a verb rather than a noun.” (Shalaby, 2017, pg 151)

“No child is naturally a troublemaker. A child is who she is - and when she walks through the school doors and interacts with its arrangements and rules, its requirements and demands, she may find herself in trouble if she challenges and refuses the power of the school to make her into a conforming, self-regulating, and self-disciplining person. It is in this interaction between child and school that trouble is made.” (Shalaby, 2017, pg. 154)

“One reason for this is that exclusion does not build community - it destroys it. The problem with weeds is that when you pull up one, many more sprout with a vengeance. It isn’t the behavior of the children that threatens community; it is the response to that behavior, the use of exclusion, that threatens community.” (Shalaby, 2017, pg 162)

“When a child is excluded, it teaches the other children that belonging to the classroom community is conditional, not absolute, contingent upon their willingness and ability to be a certain kind of person.” (Shalaby, 2017, pg. 162)

“They urge us toward a conception of community in which power is shared, and in which there are no throwaway lives. None are sacrificed to serve the needs of others. They make human being visible, recentering the fundamental needs and rights of the person: to be understood, to be loved, to be powerful.” (Shalaby, 2017, pg. 169)

“If you be love, as a teacher, then what you model is the belief - through the everyday things you do - that no human being deserves to suffer any threat to or assault on her personhood. It means that even in the face of a young person constantly calling out, cursing you out, or throwing a chair, you be love in a response that disciplines rather than punishes. You be love by modeling healing over harm. You be love by restoring community instead of excluding from community.” (Shalaby, 2017, pg 172)

“The initial function of routines is to provide children with a sense of comfort and familiarity in a strange new place. In the first weeks of school, the predictability of class routines translates into a sense of safety. As children learn the routines, they come to know the room, and what will be expected of them. To the extent that the room becomes theirs and to the extent that events are predictable and familiar-seeming, children become more able to separate and are more at ease when parents or caregivers say good-bye.” (Diamond, 2008, ch 2)

“There is an additional benefit for teachers once routines are learned: the functioning of the room demands less attention, and teachers are freer to focus on students and the work they are doing. Routines are the room’s infrastructure, the railroad tracks—how we get from here to there.” (Diamond, 2008, ch 2)

“When children are involved from the very beginning in establishing routines, they see for themselves how their intentions and purposes help form the environment; through routines, they claim the classroom for their own use.” (Diamond, 2008, ch 2)

“The group, Dewey asserts, has ‘common purposes’ that lend it power to regulate social behavior and enforce norms: ‘It is not the will or desire of any one person which establishes order but the moving spirit of the whole group.’” (Diamond, 2008, ch 2)

“Recognizing that community safety is bound up in each individual’s wellness, join us in a collective commitment to practicing healing, meeting individual and social needs, and intervening in the harms out in the world that cause suffering, threaten well-being, and intentionally allow some to thrive at the expense of others. Knowing that children can and must teach and learn human ways of being that ensure a safe world - ways of being that recognize that there is no safety for anyone as long as any human being is in a cage - we educators must embrace and leverage our power to create spaces with young people that invite, model, and nurture the abolitionist imperative.” (The Education for Liberation Network & Critical Resistance Editorial Collective, 2021, pg 112)

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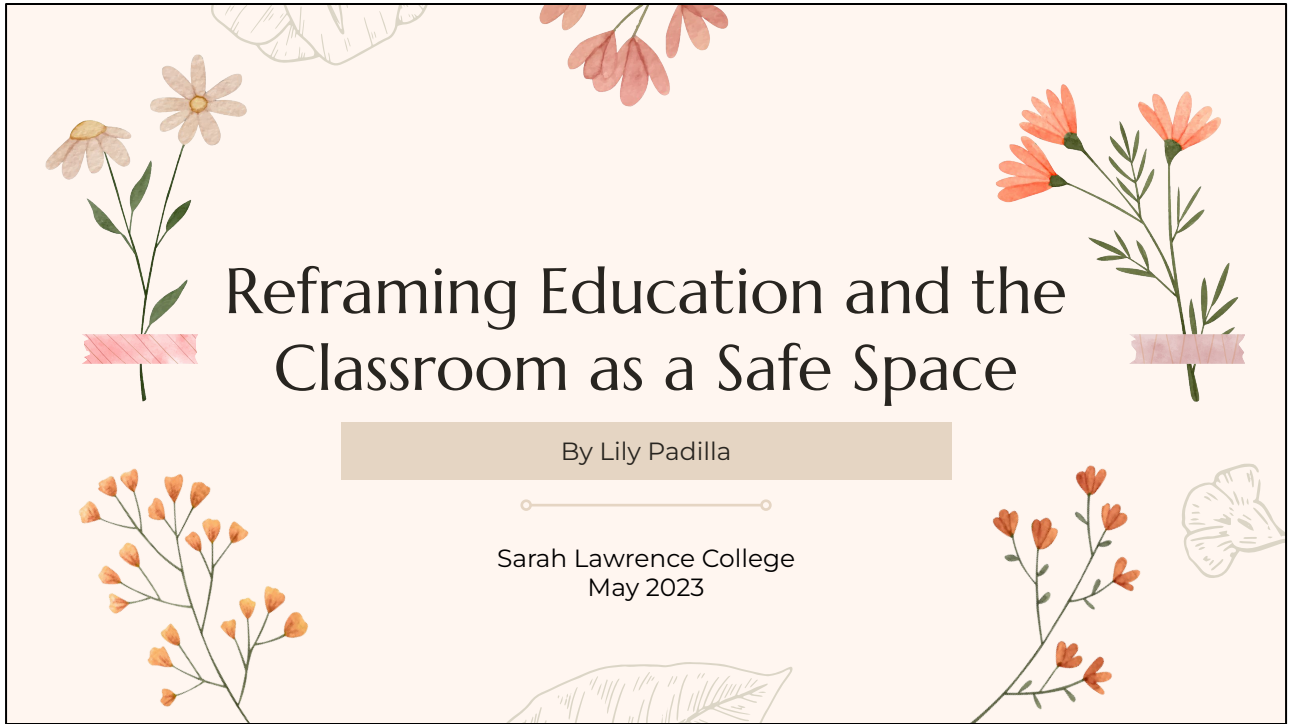
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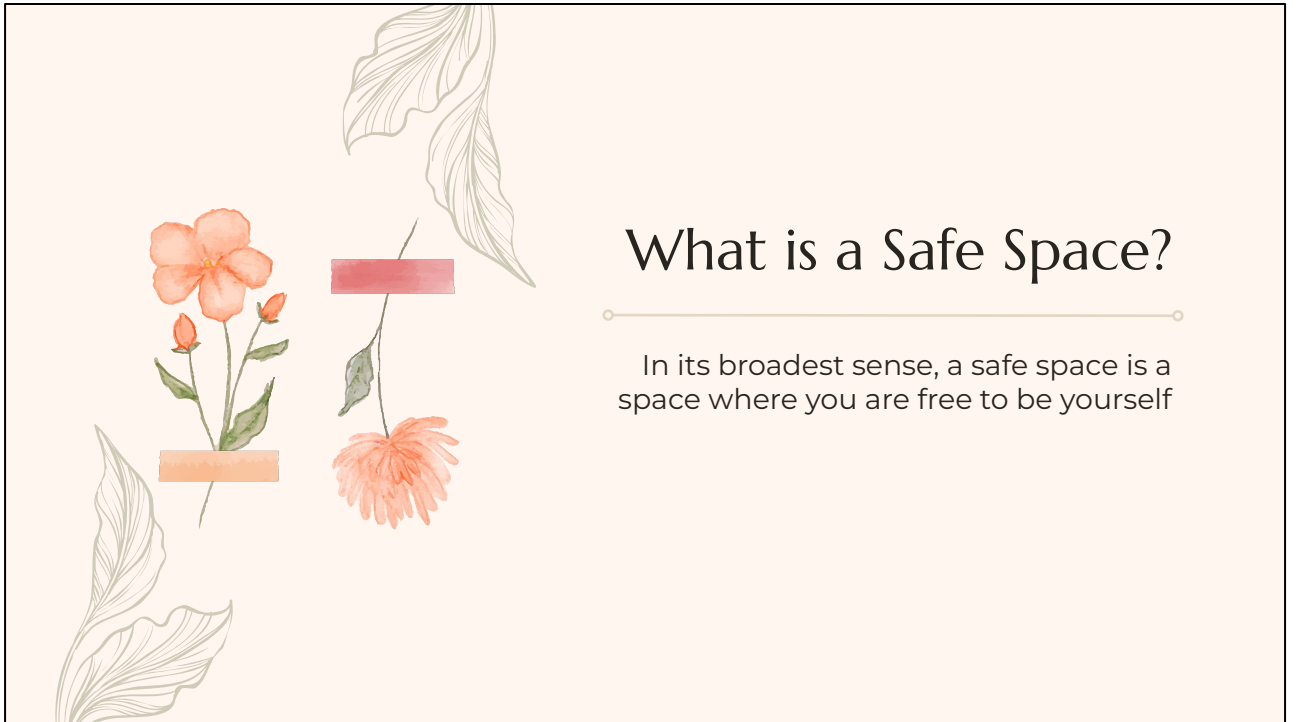


Reframing Education and the Classroom as a Safe Space

By Lily Padilla

Sarah Lawrence College
May 2023

Hello everyone, I want to thank everyone for attending my thesis presentation for the art of teaching. For my thesis, I wanted to focus on reframing education and classrooms as a safe space.



What is a Safe Space?

In its broadest sense, a safe space is a space where you are free to be yourself

Firstly, it is important to define what a safe space is. In the broadest sense, my personal definition of a safe space is a space where you are free to be yourself. However, in doing so, it should never involve denying a person's humanity.

Why is this important?

Safe spaces in my life



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I wanted to focus my thesis on safe spaces because of the importance of safe spaces in my life. When I was in spaces that made me feel safe, it allowed me to make the most growth, and growth that was meaningful rather than based on extrinsic factors and motivators. Some of my safe spaces have been my family, my friends, some of my academic classes at Sarah Lawrence and back in Colorado, and therapy. In these environments, I felt seen. Who I was was an important part of who I am today and who I can become. My identities, background, and experiences were valued and often times were brought into the light. Especially growing up as an Asian Latina girl along with many other complexities that make me who I am, it was more difficult to see myself as worthy. I felt at times that I had to hide parts of myself to feel safe. To not be bullied, stereotyped, embarrassed, or labeled.

I believe that no one should ever have to be worried about being themselves. Children spend an average of 1,000 hours a year in the classroom during their formative years where typically children sit at their desks, the teacher introduces the lesson, and students work independently. It is impossible for children to grow into their best selves when they are in an environment that invalidates their humanity. They need to be respected. They need to be loved. They need to be valued. They need to be celebrated.

Creating Safe Spaces in Education

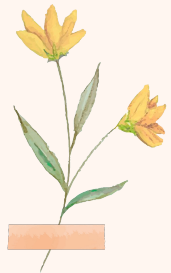
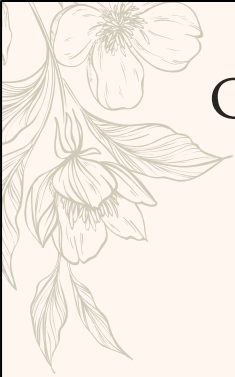
Emotionally Safe



Physically Safe



Academically Safe



In talking about safe spaces, I want to focus on the three main pillars of safety in relation to education: emotional safety, physical safety, and academic safety.

Guiding Values

Bell Hooks

Feminist Approach



Carla Shalaby

Communities of Care

Bettina Love

Freedom Dreaming

Before I go in-depth about the different aspects of safety in the classroom, I want to introduce the guiding values that have informed my thinking and practice. Firstly, Bell Hook's feminist approach to education. When I was reading about her feminist philosophy, to me what it really was about was being human. Being able to experience what it means to be human. Being vulnerable, and open. Secondly, I was inspired by Bettina Love and her philosophy of freedom dreaming. She advocates the importance of centering marginalized communities within this process of creating a more just and equitable society. Lastly, Carla Shalaby's concept of caring communities. This entails making deep and meaningful connections rooted in empathy and kindness for oneself and others. These values are important for my own creation of safe spaces for all, but especially in the classroom.

Emotional Safety

Strong Sense
of Self

Strong
Relationships

Strong
Community



The first aspect of safety I'd like to talk about is emotional safety in relation to the classroom. Emotional safety entails a strong self of self, strong relationships, and strong communities.



Honoring Yourself

- Exploring what makes you, you
- Celebrating your identities, background, family, experiences, cultures, beliefs, language, and ways of life
- “School is trying to make people, but these young people insist they are already made. Their families, their communities, their histories, their biology, their preferences, make these children distinctive people already” - Carla Shalaby
- “I come from” Poems

In order to build a strong sense of self, it is essential to honor oneself and explore what makes you, you. Often times in schools, the focus is on the question what kind of student are you? But identities, background, experiences, ways of life, etc, impact the ‘student’ identity. We should not only recognize them but they should be celebrated. It is important that children feel like they can ask questions and make connections that are relevant and meaningful to their own lives. They shouldn’t feel like they have to hide or change a part of themselves to fit into the expectations of others. I feel that Carla Shalaby puts this into words well saying “School is trying to make people, but these young people insist they are already made. Their families, their communities, their histories, their biology, their preferences, make these children distinctive people already”

At the Ella Baker School, all grades are invited to participate in making “I am” or “I come from” poems. A couple of people would share at each town meeting where all the classes and any families who could attend come together to sing songs and share what they are learning and how they are growing. When I first heard the concept, my assumption was narrow-minded. I thought they were going to be like “I am in second grade. I come from Puerto Rico and I am an older sister.” But when people shared them, they went so much deeper. We were able to learn about the meaningful parts of their lives and identity. All the things that have made them into the person they are today. I never got to do this activity with my kindergarteners, but I would like to share my “i come from” poem with you all today.

I come from rice fields carved into mountains
And majestic waters through sun lit valleys
I come from the rocky mountains with snowy caps
A mile above the sea
Where big city meets mountain town
I come from the land of golden brown almond eyes
And glistening black hair that hangs long and free
I come from green chile, tamales, and biscochitos
Fresh tortillas with pinto beans
I come from pork buns and lo mein
Moon cakes and dumplings
I come from congee
The first thing my mother fed me
I come from my grandmother Liliosa Gomez Padilla
Lillie for short





I come from delicate fingers, pointed toes, and
stretched legs
Jetes and pirouettes across marley in pink shiny
shoes
I come from a single-mother
Making after-school quesadillas
Tucking me in every single night
I come from board games and puzzles
Movie marathons and late night talks
I come from my happiest days and my saddest
nights
I come from my hopes, my dreams, my beliefs
I come from my people
The ones who make life full
I come as myself



I come from rice fields carved into mountains
And majestic waters through sun lit valleys
I come from the rocky mountains with snowy caps
A mile above the sea
Where big city meets mountain town
I come from the land of golden brown almond eyes
And glistening black hair that hangs long and free
I come from green chile, tamales, and biscochitos
Fresh tortillas with pinto beans
I come from pork buns and lo mein
Moon cakes and dumplings
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The ones who make life full
I come as myself

Celebrating my different identities and valuing my experiences lets me focus my energy on learning and growing as opposed to focusing my energy on hiding parts of myself to keep me safe. Every single person is complex and unique and should be seen and valued as such.



“When teachers shy away from intersectionality, they shy away from ever fully knowing their students’ humanity and the richness of their identities. Matterings cannot happen if identities are isolated and students cannot be their full selves.”

—Bettina Love

Bettina Love encourages looking at the whole, complex view of a child, especially those whose identities that are often neglected in education and society. She emphasizes the need for acknowledgment of intersectionality saying “When teachers shy away from intersectionality, they shy away from ever fully knowing their students’ humanity and the richness of their identities. Matterings cannot happen if identities are isolated and students cannot be their full selves.”



Impacts of Labeling

- Meet Anna
- Growing up with Labels and the Impact Today

Some labels empower us, especially those surrounding identities and communities, that we claim for ourselves. However, there are many labels that hurt us, these are often given to us by others. We should stray away from using academic and behavioral labels as they damage the wonderful complexity of the child. Jacqueline Woodson talked about labels stating “Any kind of qualifier can be harmful because who we are is not static”

Many common behavior labels you may hear in the world of education are disruptive, slow, or struggling. However, we should also shy away from the seemingly quote in quote good labels we sometimes give to our students like advanced, smart, or strong. These labels become who we are. When teachers see their students like this, their peers will, and eventually, the child will see themselves as this label.

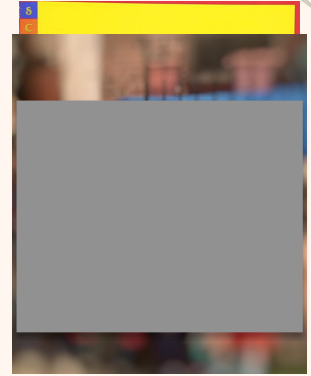
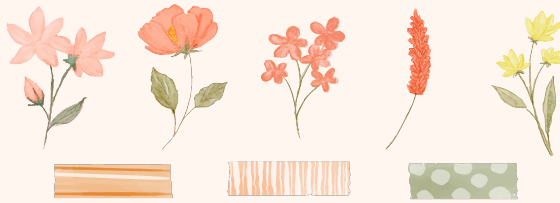
Now, I want you all to meet Anna, a fourth grader at Claremont Elementary. She lights up any room and strives to make deep meaningful connections with people. One morning, she walked into the room talking about what happened on the bus. These boys were making fun of her and pulling at her hair. This of course made her angry, so she hit them and fought fire with fire. My host teacher, Mr. Mace, suggested that she tell the assistant principal what happened so that she can take responsibility for her actions. While I took her down to the office Anna said to me, “I don’t want to tell her what happened because I’m a bad kid and I don’t want to be a bad kid, those boys were just pulling my hair and being annoying.” When we got to the office, the first thing Anna said was “I was taking out my anger in inappropriate ways on the bus” with her body slumped and eyes down. It seemed like she has done this before and knew exactly what to say and how to say it. She looked defeated and she knows she will always be that girl

who gets in trouble. A bad kid. Her humanity is damaged because of labels.

While we are becoming generally mindful of these bad labels, we need to also stray away from even seemingly good labels like smart or advanced. I grew up with these labels which made me feel good... at the time. However, as Woodson explains, it put me in a static position. If I got below like a 95 or didn't immediately understand a new concept, I equated that to a failure. A failure of myself because who I was was wrapped in this label. We all need to break free from labels and give ourselves the flexibility to experience life as humans, not just as 'a bad kid' or 'a smart kid'. We should be allowed to grow, and change. We should be allowed to make mistakes and have hard days without it becoming the only way we are seen.

Exploring and Cultivating Humanness

- Children need strong relationships and an accepting environment so they can experiment what it means to be a part of this world
- When Sophie Gets Angry, Really, Really Angry
- Alexandria and Chloe

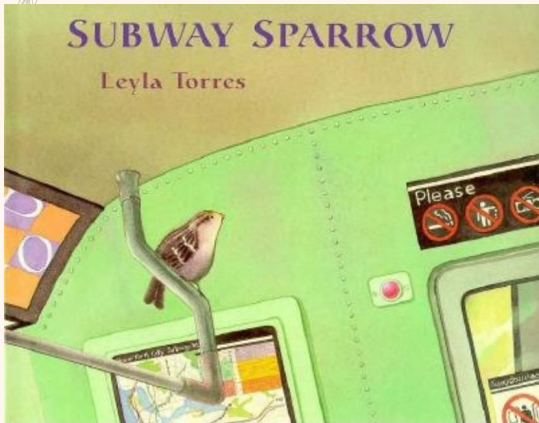
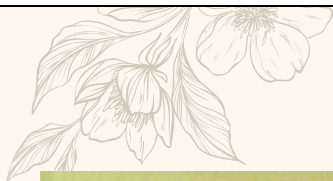


Furthermore, having strong relationships is an important part of exploring and cultivating humanness fully. Children need to have strong relationships with others, families, peers, and teachers, and an accepting environment so that they can experiment with what it means to be a part of this world.

One way that my host teachers and I have cultivated humanness is through books. A favorite book in Sarah's 4's classroom at the ECC was Molly Bang's *When Sophie Gets Angry, Really, Really Angry*. After reading this book, we asked the class "what do you do when you become angry?" Some students explained how they like to be by themselves, or they like to be with their grown-ups, or they like to draw. When we got to one child, Jonathan, he said "I don't get angry." Well, I have definitely seen him get angry before. However, it seemed like he was associating quote in quote bad feelings with being bad which again puts a label on him that damages his sense of self. We explained to him that it is okay to have big feelings, we all have them at times. It's important to recognize them and know what to do with them. He was still reluctant to admit that he gets mad but he did talk about liking the comfort of his mom to calm him down. He was slowly letting his guard down knowing that the people around him accept him in all ways of being. Navigating emotions is an unending task for a human, it is important that children have the relationships and space to feel comfortable exploring them where they won't be judged or shut down.

I also want to talk about two girls from the 4's class, Alexandria and Chloe. These two girls grew a strong friendship with each other. They played together every day and were so excited to see each other each morning. In the spring semester, I saw them play and experiment with

the concepts of friendship and conflict. They started to have more conflicts saying to each other “I don’t want to play with you and I’m gonna tell your mom” all while still attached at the hip and playing together. Their strong connection was necessary for their exploration of what it means to have conflict and resolve it. They felt safe in experimenting with conflict; what happens when I say this? What about this?; because they knew that at the end of the day, they cared about each other and loved being around each other. Life is messy, so it is important to be around people that accept and embrace the mess.



Honoring Each Other

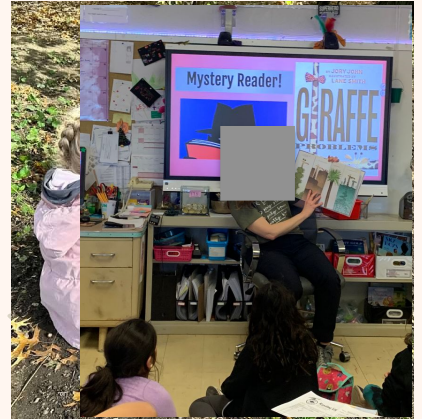
- Honoring who you are leads to honoring who other people are
- Subway Sparrow



Another important aspect of creating strong relationships is honoring who others are. But only once we can honor and celebrate ourselves, we are able to honor and celebrate others. At Ella Baker, one of the first books my host teacher Taz read to the class was *Subway Sparrow* by Leyla Torres. This book is about a sparrow that gets trapped in a subway car. The people on the subway work together to save the sparrow. The people represent many different walks of life; children, adults, different cultures, different languages. We then talked about community and compared the community in the book with our classroom community. The children talked about how both communities have people with similarities and differences and both communities work together and help each other and show kindness. The class got to see that communities are made up of different people with different ways of life, but that does not mean we can't come together and create a space where everyone feels happy and safe together.

School, Families, & Community

- We must bridge the gap between school life and outside life in order to be full life-long learners.
- Families in the classroom
- Field Trips

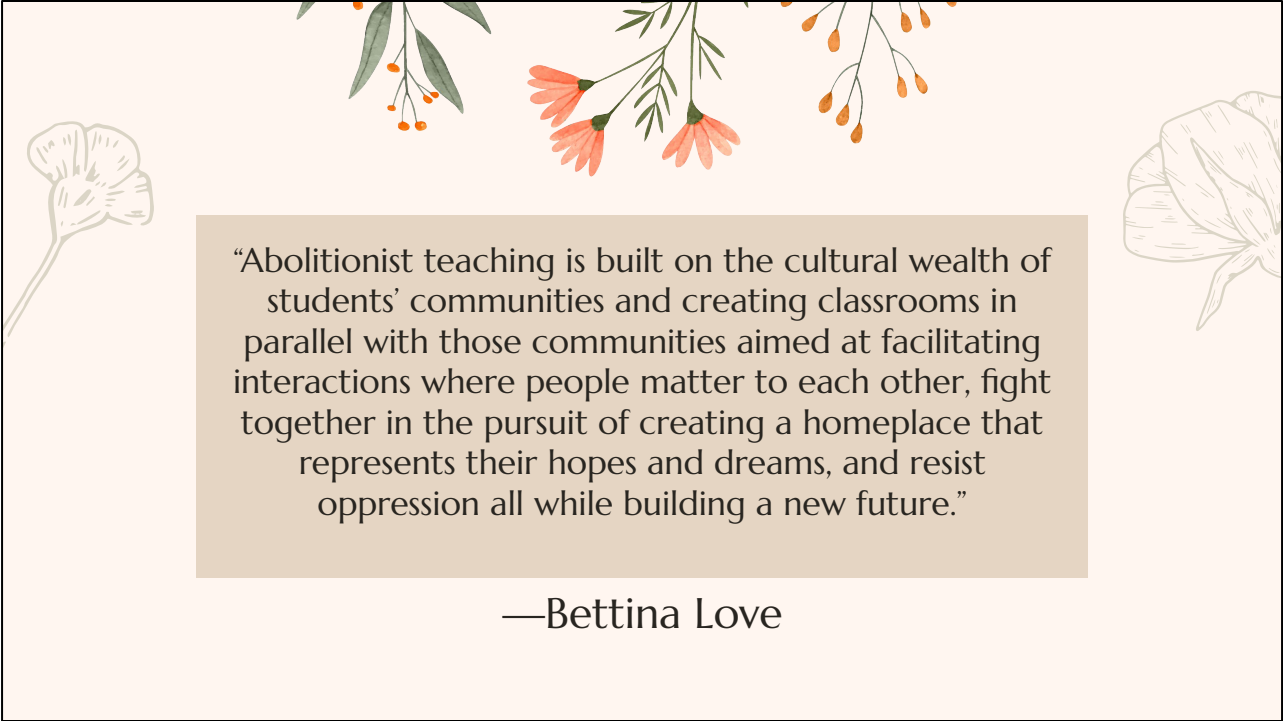


To further our feelings of belonging and community, we must acknowledge children's lives outside of the classroom. Their families, and their communities. Who we are is affected by both. We must bridge the gap between school life and outside life in order to be full life-long learners. Learning cannot be confined within four walls with the teachers voice being the only voice in the room.

One of my favorite parts about opening up the classroom after the pandemic is being able to invite outside people like families in. At Claremont, March was reading month. Mr. Mace invited families to come to the classroom to read a book to the class as surprise mystery readers. Parents, grandparents, and siblings came to read picture books. One mystery reader was the sister of a boy in our class, Jacob. His sister only speaks Spanish, so she read a picture book in Spanish while he translated it to the class. Other students who spoke and understood Spanish also helped with the translation. These children usually are mellow and are hesitant to participate in front of everyone. However, during this mystery reading, they lit up and were so excited. They got to feel what it's like to be the ones who have the knowledge. I was sitting next to one girl who speaks Spanish and after every page I always leaned over to her asking what was happening. She had this huge smile on her face when she translated for me and was so happy to help me, her teacher. When their home life and language was a part of the classroom, they felt seen. They felt like their ways of life were valuable and worthy of being a part of the classroom. Also after reading, many students asked the mystery reader questions about their life. The class got to learn about each other including their families and life outside of the classroom. We all loved having mystery readers and the students whose families came

got to feel pride about where they come from. Having families a part of the classroom is so important for the child as well as our classroom community as a whole. They get to learn together and connect with each other which creates a strong sense of belonging in the classroom.

It is also important to bring children outside of the classroom and into their community. What I loved about being at Ella Baker and working at a city school was the plentiful opportunities that were right outside the doors. We went on many walking trips and field trips to important places in New York City like the Bronx Zoo, Queens County Farm, and Central Park. These photos are from our central park trip. We went as the seasons were changing. Taz asked them what they saw. They saw things like buildings, skyscrapers, people walking their dogs, people walking together, statues, street lamps, trees, a lake, and leaves changing color. All the things that are important about living in Manhattan. They had some time to play in a field in Central Park. They incorporated things in the environment like sticks, leaves, and mud into their play. While we were there, we saw a park ranger who was working on the upkeep of the land. Some children got to help and learn about members of their community and their responsibilities. Feeling like a part of your community is so important, and schools need to give children the opportunity to engage with it and learn about it. This is valuable for their growth of them as active members of society.



“Abolitionist teaching is built on the cultural wealth of students’ communities and creating classrooms in parallel with those communities aimed at facilitating interactions where people matter to each other, fight together in the pursuit of creating a homeplace that represents their hopes and dreams, and resist oppression all while building a new future.”

—Bettina Love

I think Bettina Love sums up the importance of student’s communities in regards to education by stating “Abolitionist teaching is built on the cultural wealth of students’ communities and creating classrooms in parallel with those communities aimed at facilitating interactions where people matter to each other, fight together in the pursuit of creating a homeplace that represents their hopes and dreams, and resist oppression all while building a new future.”

Physical Safety

The Physical Classroom

Tone of the Classroom

Caring Communities



Next, I want to talk about physical safety. Physical safety in education refers to the physical classroom, the tone of the classroom, and caring communities.



The Physical Classroom

Differentiated Spaces

Ownership of the Classroom

Displaying Student Work

Lack of Public Student Tracking

Firstly, the physical classroom should reflect and contribute to the teacher's values. Given that I want to ensure an emotionally safe environment for my students, my classroom will reflect my values of allowing and valuing humanness.

The physical classroom should have differentiated spaces. Children need spaces where they can be by themselves, especially if they are feeling big emotions. Spaces to interact with others to build those strong connections, collaborate, and share their learning. And spaces where we can all come together and build a community we are proud and happy to be a part of.

Children should feel like they are a part of the classroom, this can be created through community circles, and it can furthermore be created through the physical space. Children should be able to move about the classroom with ease and access materials they need to further their learning to feel like the space is theirs. This also includes flexible seating options, fidgets, and comfort objects. When they have ownership of the classroom, they feel more connected and responsibility to the classroom and the classroom community. This also furthers emotional safety because children feel like they belong and are valued.

The walls also reflect teachers' values. I want my classroom to display and celebrate the works of my students. This gives them confidence and pride in their work. It is also important to note that the work displayed does not and in fact, should not be the most cleaned-up, perfect work.

This demonstrates that they don't need to wait to be perfect to be proud of sharing a part of themselves. I also want to ensure that there is no student tracking system displayed for everyone to see. In second grade, we had cards that tracked our behavior. Green was good, yellow was on the fence, and red was bad. We could all see who is in trouble and eventually

pick up patterns of who are the good students and who are the bad troublemakers. One day, I forgot my notebook at home and had to break my streak of all green days and have a yellow card next to my name. I sobbed, and that whole day I wasn't focused, and I felt so embarrassed. I never want to replicate this experience. I never want to compare children to each other and I never want them to feel shameful.

At Claremont, they use a reading program and track how much time they read. Every classroom has a long chart with hours across the top. Students get more stars the more hours they read. At a quick glance, you see that this kid is way over here and this kid has only read a couple of hours. Personally, this would make me hate reading. Something that I appreciate that Mr. Mace does is comply with school requirements of public tracking while not showing the drastic differences. Every student just has one star and he updates the number of hours occasionally. Students can still see and make those comparisons, but at least this way isn't contributing to the problem as much as the other way.

Tone of the classroom



Reliable

Respectful

Understanding

Inclusive

Another important part of the classroom environment is the tone of the classroom. I want to ensure a space that is reliable. Students feel like they can come in and know that they will be taken care of by teachers and their peers and that they have the opportunity to grow, learn, take risks, and make mistakes. At the ECC in the 4's classroom, this was most of their first times at school and that can be really scary and nerve-racking. We soon began to know the children and know what routines they need to make that transition smoother. We made sure we had a red book for Johnathan, the water table open for Elijah, I held hands and walked to the window with Mason each day, etc. Also, teachers should ensure that their classroom is a reliable space because often students have difficult home lives. When school can be reliable, it acts as an escape from the stressors at home. Some Monday mornings at Claremont, the day starts out very calm. It's like everyone just took a deep breath and let out any stress or negative feelings from the weekend.

We should also ensure our classroom has an understanding tone. It can be so easy to approach children who aren't doing what they need to be doing with strict demands. But in those situations, what really works is talking with them and ensuring that we are on the same page and can know how to move forward with all the information.

Additionally, to further cultivate emotional safety, the classroom needs to be respectful and inclusive of all members and what they offer. This goes back to honoring oneself, honoring others, and building strong relationships and communities.

Caring Communities



Classroom Values



Classroom Community Responsibilities



Threats to Caring Communities

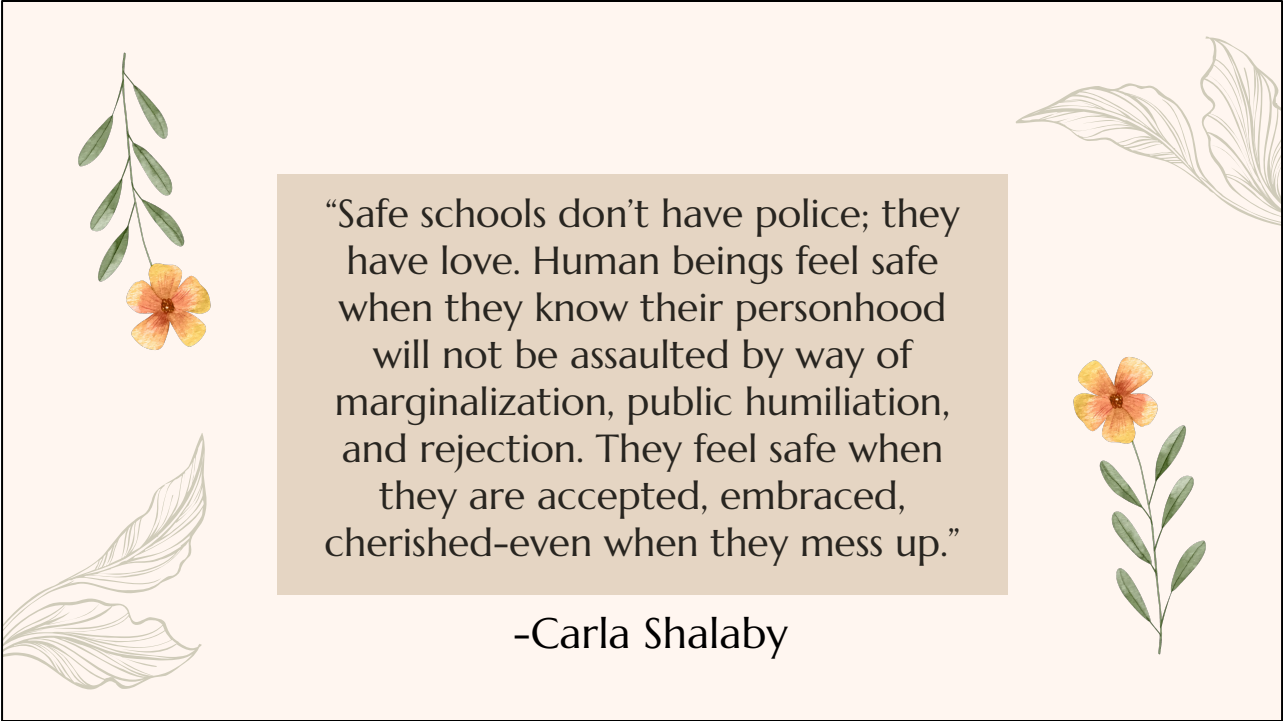
Having your values be representative of the physical space and tone of the room better creates caring communities. I value the well-being of others, collaboration, conversation, community, and meaningful connections. I wish to instill those values in my students so that we all have a common goal of creating a safe learning environment.

With that, it is important for everyone to understand what responsibilities they have as a member of a classroom community. In all my teaching placements, these responsibilities came up as a conversation with the children, not telling them how they must act. They included helping each other, listening to each other, and showing kindness and empathy.

I also want to address some threats to caring communities like bullying or intense consequences that uphold the school-to-prison pipeline. The hope is that by leading with values of care, love, and empathy, these threats are mitigated. Additionally, teachers should be aware of biases in which students are policed more. On average, Black students are disproportionately suspended or expelled compared to their White counterparts.



In 2011-2012, the African American Policy Forum looked at discipline rates in Boston and New York. We see here that Black boys are disciplined about 6-8 times more than their white counterparts, and Black girls are disciplined about 10-11 times more than their white counterparts.



“Safe schools don’t have police; they have love. Human beings feel safe when they know their personhood will not be assaulted by way of marginalization, public humiliation, and rejection. They feel safe when they are accepted, embraced, cherished—even when they mess up.”

-Carla Shalaby

Carla Shalaby explains how Safe schools don’t have police; they have love. And how “Human beings feel safe when they know their personhood will not be assaulted by way of marginalization, public humiliation, and rejection. They feel safe when they are accepted, embraced, cherished—even when they mess up.”

Outside Threats to Physical Safety

Unfortunately, things happen. It is important to just be as prepared as possible



Before I talk about academic safety, I want to address possible outside threats to physical safety. Unfortunately these things happen, and are unfortunately worsening in the current climate of the country. What we can do in the classroom is just making sure we are prepared as possible. Some things I have thought about informing my students about are the Run, hide, fight protocol, knowing all escape routes, using classrooms resources as possible shields or counterattacks, etc. I also want to keep thinking about approaching those conversations with our young children because that will always be a hard topic that will be discussed frequently. I hope that my efforts in making the classroom safe in other ways will help alleviate some anxieties surrounding these threats rather than heighten them, however, there is no overall solution because it is a problem bigger than the classroom.

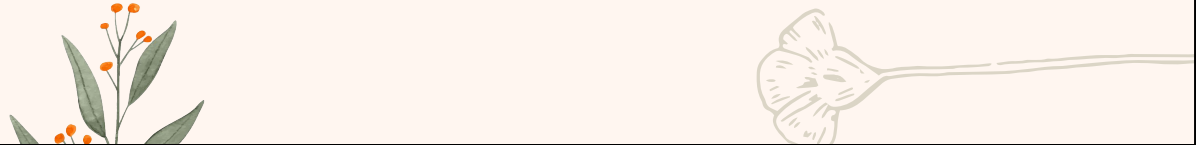
Academic Safety

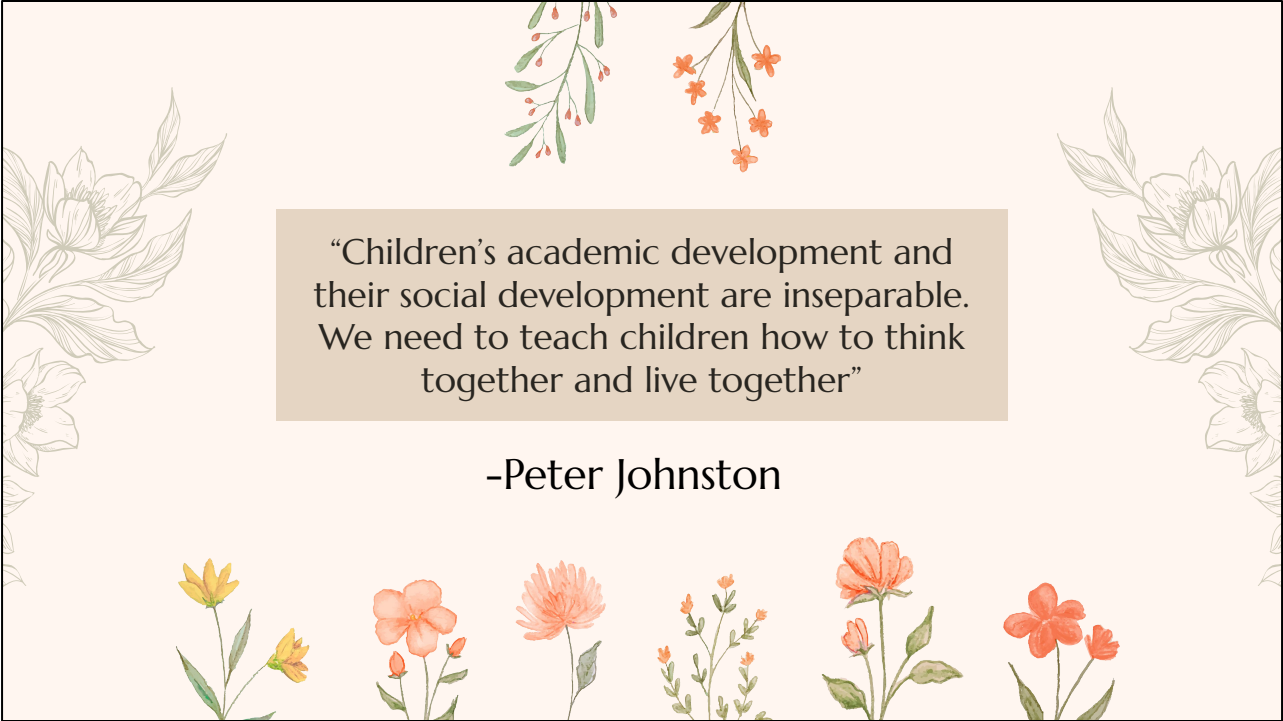


Socialization
of Learning

Growth
Mindset

Contextualizing
Learning





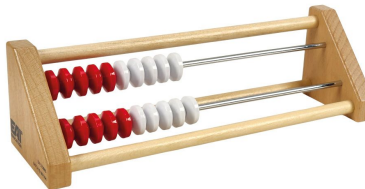
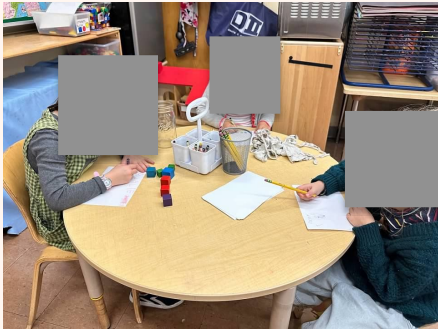
“Children’s academic development and their social development are inseparable. We need to teach children how to think together and live together”

-Peter Johnston

Academic safety relies on emotional and physical safety. Peter johnson sums up this relationship well stating “Children’s academic development and their social development are inseparable. We need to teach children how to think together and live together”

Learning is a Social Act

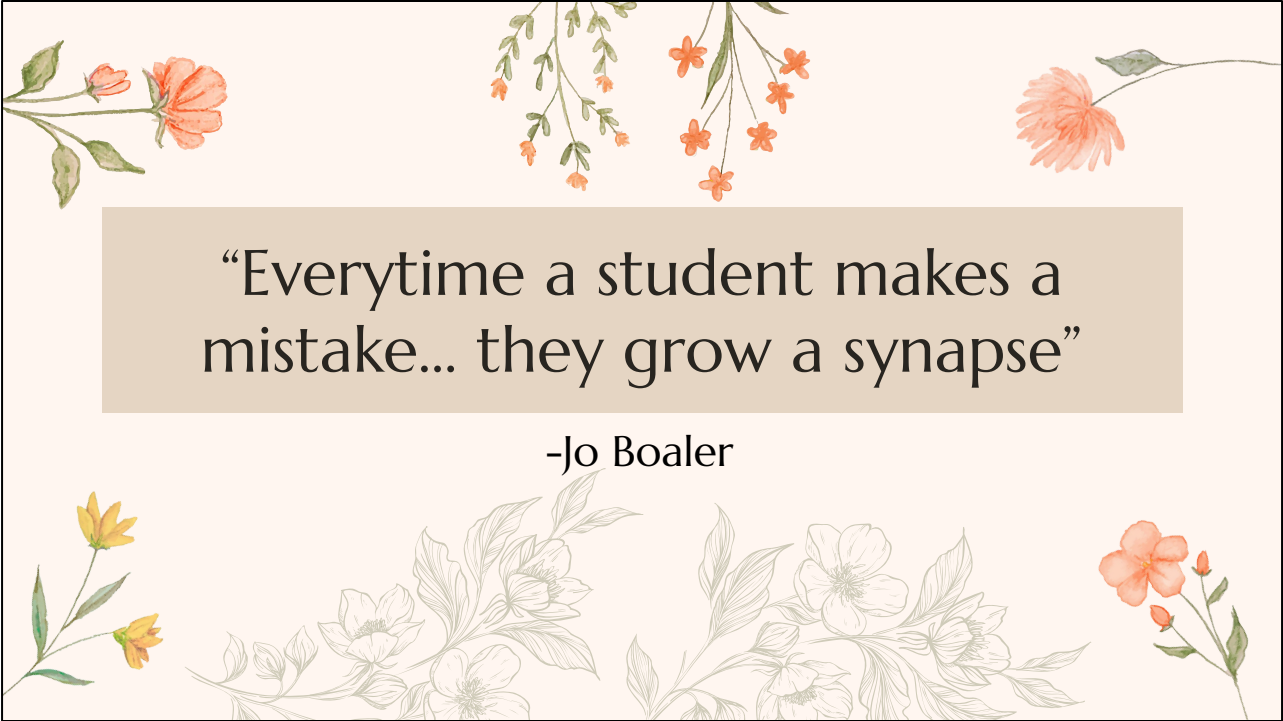
- Making space for students to talk
- Valuing different ways of thinking



Often in classrooms, the loudest voice in the room is the teachers. Children sit and listen to the teacher and then are expected to do their work silently and independently. In order for children to be active in their own learning, they must have the time and opportunity to talk. Each morning at Ella Baker, children got to read books. They enjoyed reading together sometimes. Or if they were reading independently, they often wanted to share what they read or what the book made them think of with their peers. This opened up further conversations with rich questions and connections. They expanded their world through talking with others while also building strong relationships with each other. Talking to others has been a way of gaining and constructing knowledge for centuries, why do we now then restrict this natural way of living and learning together?

An important part of making talk and conversation as a central theme for learning is being able to value different ways of thinking and approaching the world. I loved the way Taz approached mathematical learning. These pictures are showing an activity where children have to figure out how many cubes are in the jar and how do they know. Children showed different ways of representing counting and numbers. They showed their thinking by drawing pictures, numbers, symbols, or equations. Then Taz would display each others work and they got to see how different people approach the problem to meet the same goal. Additionally, we were working on quick mental math strategies with a Rekenrek. So for example, Taz would briefly show 5 red beads on the top and 5 red and 1 white beads on the bottom. Then she asked how many beads were there and how did they know. Some students would talk about how they know 5 red beads plus 5 red beads is 10 beads, and then they add 1 to that to get 11. Or they would

explain how they saw 1 white bead on the bottom so they know there were 5 red beads, and then they counted 5 red beads on the top, so 6 plus 5 is 11. Also during these math talks, students would often miscount or make mistakes. We made sure that these mistakes weren't seen as a bad thing, rather they are seen as an opportunity to learn more.



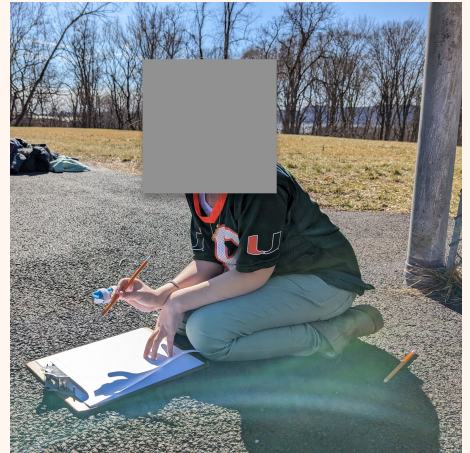
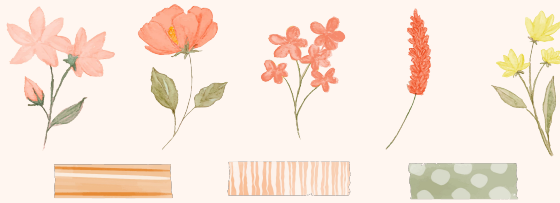
“Everytime a student makes a mistake... they grow a synapse”

-Jo Boaler

Ensuring growth mindset in the classroom is important for student’s confidence and motivation. Jo Boaler explains how everytime a student makes a mistake, they grow a synapse. Their brain fires to make connections and have a deeper understanding of concepts.

Anna and Mathematics

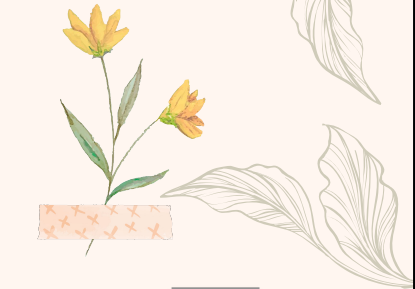
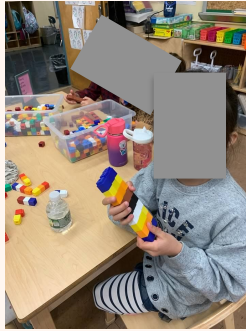
- Anna is reluctant to anything that involves math
- “I’m too stupid for these stupid questions.”
- Seeing herself in a positive light with math



In talking about growth mindset, I want to circle back to my fourth grader Anna. She is reluctant to anything that involves math and often expresses her hatred for it. Everything relating to math is stupid. Especially during assessments she says things like “I’m too stupid for these stupid questions.” Anna has labeled herself as being bad at math and stupid, and thus everything becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. She gives up before even trying. I want her to view herself in a positive light with math. This will build her confidence in her skills and knowledge, and hopefully motivate her to not give up so quickly. One day, we had a math puzzle during the morning meeting. It was a 3 by 3 grid where numbers across and down summed together had to equal a certain number. Anna volunteered to fill in one of the boxes. There was already a 9 and a 4 and the numbers needed to equal 18. She filled in a 6. I told her not quite but close. When she realized she was wrong, she quickly erased the number, hurried back to her seat, and disengaged from the activity. I invited her back to the board and to try again. After a couple more moments of thinking it through, she realized she was just a number off. In having her fix her mistakes and keep trying, I’m hoping that she gains resilience and sees herself as capable.

Discovering and Creating Meaningful Learning

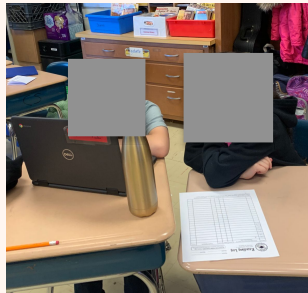
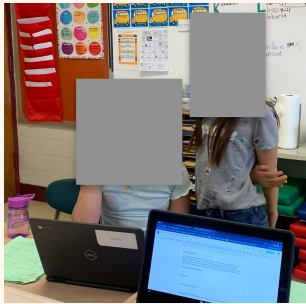
- Being an active creator of knowledge and skills building



Lastly, children should be given opportunities to discover and create meaningful and authentic learning experiences. This includes them playing a central role in knowledge and skills exploration and discovery. Because of this, play is a vital part of learning and growth. These pictures show kindergarteners at Ella Baker play with different math materials like pattern blocks and cubes. The girl on the left was making hamburgers, the girl in the middle made 4 cube sticks with the same pattern, and I forget what the last girl was making, but we can see that it was very intentional. Through playing with materials, they tackled concepts like patterns, counting, shapes, shape relationships, symmetry, and balance. Also all the while connecting school life with outside experiences. Using discovery, creation, and play to stimulate learning makes the learning relevant and personal to the child. Play offers so much to each child once we recognize play as work.

Discovering and Creating Meaningful Learning

- Incorporating what students care about



OPENING SCENE
Larry wants to build a shoe store. He stands in an empty plot of land imagining how it will look. The shoe store looks like a row of shoes. Larry has a hat and shoes, a t-shirt and pants.

CHARACTER AND MOTIVATION
Opening Scene
Natalia rides a bus and sits in the back of the bus, and then a white laydie walks in the bus and she can't find a seat and then the white laydie looks at natalia and says get up and give me your seat. Natalia gets up and glares at the white laydie

Character Motivation
20 minutes later natalia nooks on camilas door, camila says what's up and natalia says YOU CAN NOT BELIEVE WHAT HAPPENED TO ME TODAY, what says camila natalia says so I was going in the bus and I sat in the back of the bus and then a white laydie walks right up to me and says get up and I say why and she says because I can't find a seat and I well I'm not getting up she says if n black I say fine and get up and

Earthquake!
This is a story about the San Francisco Earthquake

Meet Emily and Christopher on April 18th, 1906 they are very poor and live in a barn with the horses. Emily shines shoes and Christopher cleans barns. They have no other family, they just have each other and three horses. Emily is 9 years old and Christopher is 12 years old and they both love their horses soooooo much. It's crazy like they are like family. They also have a dog named Apple, they love Apple so much. Apple was a Mut. She had fleas and she was ugly but in a cute kind of way. She was brown and white.

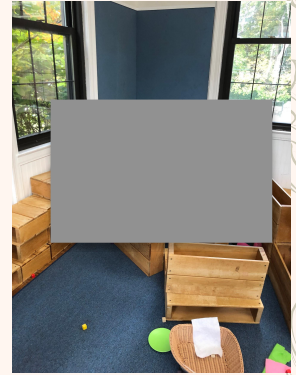
Rumble, rumble, shake, shake went to the ground.
"Christopher help me!" yelled Emily.
"Save the horses," shouted Christopher.
So then they tried their best to save the horses. They dashed to the stables and tried to lead the horses to the exit but then the wall fell down and they were trapped.
But then Emily noticed that there was a little space in the cracked wall so the mice can still get in. The oldest horse broke her leg and arm and the littlest horse broke there leg and it was only 8 months. "Nooooooooooooo," yelled Emily and Christopher at the same time.
Just then a lantern fell and broke. A fire started to spread. Christopher and Emily started to panic, then Christopher said, "Grab the horse blanket to take out the fire. Emily did exactly that and took out the fire.
Then Emily and Christopher realized that it was an Earthquake!!!!!!!!!!!!
Crack, crack. The water pipes broke.
"Noooooo."
Emily and Christopher rushed all over to find water.

in line but then the same white ed up. The white laydie sees I not waiting I'm going in front ven the white laydie chrise to

It is also important to incorporate students interests into their learning. This past month at Claremont, we were in our historical fiction unit. We read books as a class and small groups. Students examined what makes a story historical fiction which ultimately led up to their own creation of historical fiction stories like the examples on the right. However, it took a while to get to creating our own stories. I have discussed many of times with Mr. Mace how the tasks the curriculum asked of the children weren't the best. I didn't care for it, Mr. Mace didn't care for it all that much as well as the other teachers and the students. The curriculum asked them to write responses to prompts or fill out graphic organizers basically every day. It became tiring very quickly and students were not as excited as when they got to write their own stories. When they had the opportunity to write about what they wanted to write about, they began to care more about their work. They were excited to share their progress with me and their peers. They wanted to bounce off ideas and make their stories the best they could. I also could see their understanding of concepts that previous writing prompts and graphic organizers asked of them through the creation of their own stories. They understood what needs to be included for a story to be considered historical fiction and related that to a common theme. Their learning became meaningful once they got to incorporate what they care about into their school work.

Discovering and Creating Meaningful Learning

- Authentic Learning is not linear and does not have a timeline



We must also recognize that learning does not naturally occur in a linear fashion. Everyone is on their own journey to learn more about the world around them. It is reductionist of us to think otherwise. Therefore, the most valuable thing we can offer to children is time. Time to explore and delve deeper. Time to revisit concepts and ideas. Time to be present. One of my favorite parts of the Early Childhood Center were the block areas. We had a big open space for hollow blocks and a separate wide room for smaller blocks. Here children got to construct a new world. A recurring theme in the hollow block area was building something where everyone could fit inside; from a boat or an airplane to a house, a doctor's office, or a stage. All the children gathered in this space and were transported into their newly constructed world. They had roles and jobs they performed. Over the days they would recreate these structures and swap roles or change the narrative. This was their time to grow and learn with each other in a fun and authentic way, a valuable opportunity that could never be replaced by sitting at desks and filling in bubbles.

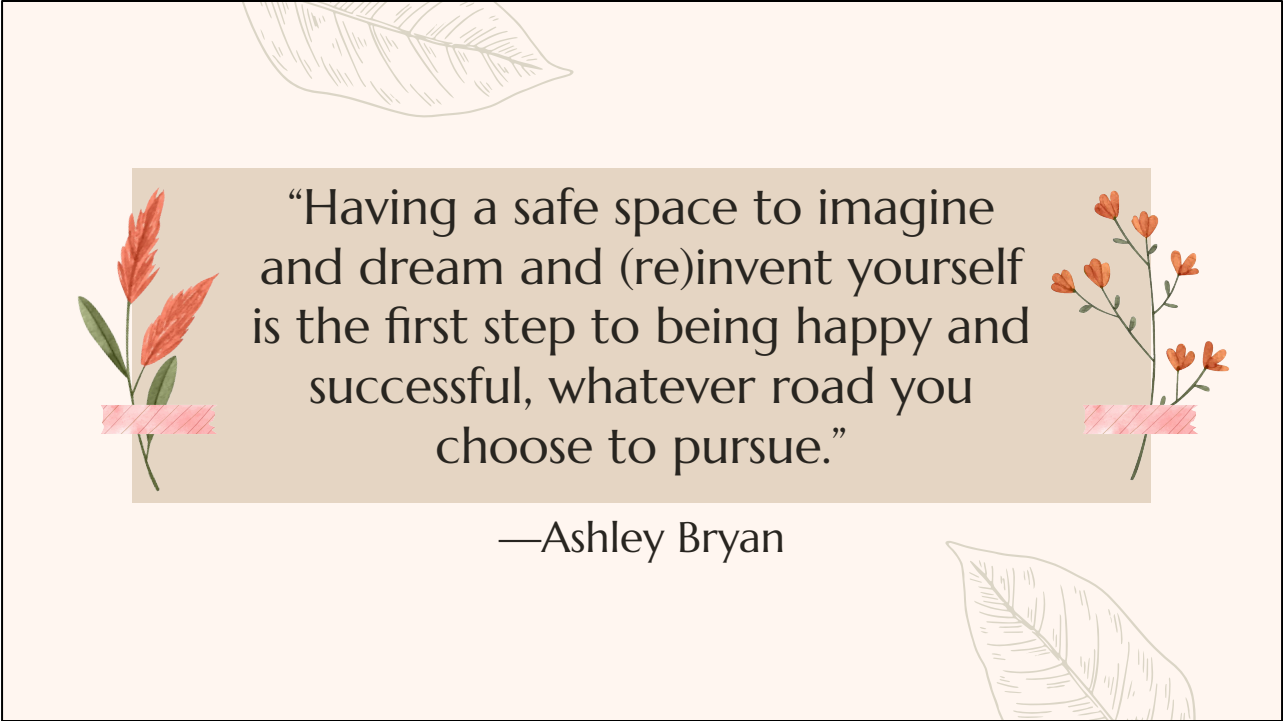


“The key is curiosity, and it is curiosity, not answers, that we model. As we seek to learn more about a child, we demonstrate that acts of observing, listening, questioning, and wondering. When we are curious about a child’s words and our responses to those words, the child feels respected. The child is respected.”



-Vivian Paley

Everyone has an innate curiosity to learn about the world. Schools need to capitalize on this curiosity and not suppress this natural human experience. Vivian Paley explains “The key is curiosity, and it is curiosity, not answers, that we model. As we seek to learn more about a child, we demonstrate that acts of observing, listening, questioning, and wondering. When we are curious about a child’s words and our responses to those words, the child feels respected. The child is respected.”



“Having a safe space to imagine
and dream and (re)invent yourself
is the first step to being happy and
successful, whatever road you
choose to pursue.”

—Ashley Bryan

I want to close with this quote by Ashley Bryan “having a safe space to imagine and dream and (re)invent yourself is the first step to being happy and successful, whatever road you choose to pursue. We all thrive when we are in spaces that make us feel valued and celebrated. We need to reimagine our classrooms as these kinds of spaces for our students, every single student, and for ourselves. Our job as teachers is to help our children become the best they can be, and that can only happen when we value them as complex individuals and honor their humanity. Thank you for listening to my presentation Reframing Education and the Classroom as a Safe Space!

Thank you 😊

