

CATHOLIC TEACHERS' **SAFER SPACES SERIES**

**Safer Spaces?
Braver Spaces?
– Our Collective
Responsibility**

Having an awareness of the safety and the bravery required to share personal lived experiences with others is important to ensuring that learning in many contexts can occur. In his keynote at the Association's virtual Connecting with Members Forum series event, **Dr. Andrew B. Campbell** emphasized that "There are no safe spaces, there are only brave spaces." His impactful words remind us that working to ensure psychological safety is difficult, yet exceedingly important.

This resource outlines the challenges of safe spaces and brave spaces and contextualizes the need for these considerations to be responsive to teacher responsibilities under the law, while encouraging reflection on your own leadership and/or teaching practice.

The Canadian Mental Health Commission reflects the difficulty in the promise of "safe spaces" in their **Safer Space Guidelines**, including the following definition:

"A safer space is a supportive, non-threatening environment where all participants can feel comfortable to express themselves and share experiences without fear of discrimination or reprisal. We use the word safer to acknowledge that safety is relative: not everyone feels safe under the same conditions. By acknowledging the experiences of each person in the room, we hope to create as safe an environment as possible. Creating a safer space is especially important when dealing with mental health issues, which can be a sensitive area for people and involve deeply personal or traumatic experiences."

In "**Creating Safe-ish Learning Spaces – Attempts to Practice and Ethics of Care**," South African educational researchers Pam Sykes and Daniela Gachago also challenge teachers to first stop and think about safe spaces while considering the power and privileges they hold:

"First, we argue that there cannot be, and in fact should not be, an ideal space that is absolutely safe and inoffensive for everyone. On the contrary, declared safe spaces may serve simply to make privileged people in the room comfortable, at the expense of marginalised ones. Secondly, we argue that safety is not something we – particularly we as white, middle-class educators in South Africa – can bestow on our learners, but something that needs to be negotiated and created in community."

Guaranteeing a completely "safe space" is quite difficult, if not impossible. Despite this, it is imperative that teachers and union leaders do their best to create one, and recognize that it requires an ongoing dialogue and relationship with communities you are looking to create the "safe space" for. Not addressing this at all can lead to the risk of real harm, including:

- The harm of revealing personal information that could make people vulnerable to harassment, discrimination, or attack (e.g., information on criminal records, or sexual orientation, gender identity).
- The harm of being subjected to or witnessing abusive ways of interacting. These might include overt violence, abusive, racist or sexist language, shouting, belittling etc.
- The harm of having to continually explain and justify one's experience of oppression to those who do not share it.
- The harm of suffering post-traumatic flash backs.
- The harm of being isolated, marginalized, or excluded.
- The harm of being held back in one's intellectual or personal growth, by not feeling able or encouraged to take risks.

What is Psychological Safety?

Schools are dynamic spaces hosting students from many different backgrounds, staff with many different roles, and people from various communities. Maintaining respectful relationships among and across these various groups is a challenging and rewarding process. For this to be done effectively, it is important that Catholic teachers and union leaders understand their duty of care in relation to psychological safety.

The **University of Alberta** defines **psychologically healthy workplaces** as spaces where:

- “every reasonable effort is made to promote mental health through awareness, resources, and education;” and
- “every reasonable effort is made to prevent harm to mental health through negligent, reckless, or deliberate conduct.”

The **Canadian Medical Association** defines **psychologically safe classrooms** as having “a feeling of comfort expressing oneself, including expressing mistakes and concerns, without fear of embarrassment or ridicule,” whereas, “an unsafe learning environment can cause [learners] to feel anxious, ashamed, or inadequate. As a result, they may ask fewer questions or speak out less.”

It is every teacher’s duty of care to ensure that their students feel safe and welcome at school. Every teacher likewise has the right to feel safe and welcome in their work environments. While union leaders and teachers in their varied contexts, whether it is the school, an executive meeting, or other events, can try to ensure psychological safety through the practice of group norms, equity-centered facilitation, and more, it takes everyone’s commitment to centre the safety of all participants.

Whether utilizing the terminology of “brave space” or “safe space,” or perhaps more accurately “safer space,” all spaces need to centre accountability. This can foster a deeper understanding of diverse lived experiences, create opportunities for everyone to challenge conditions that oppress marginalized communities, and a recognition of intent and impact.



The Legal Context – Ontario's *Human Rights Code*

Considering the creation of safer spaces can help all educators ensure that they comply and uphold the protected grounds under **Ontario's *Human Rights Code***. These include:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Citizenship• Race• Place of origin• Ethnic origin• Colour• Ancestry• Disability | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Age• Creed• Sex/pregnancy• Family status• Marital status• Sexual orientation• Gender identity | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gender expression• Receipt of public assistance (in housing)• Record of offenses (in employment) |
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The Ontario College of Teachers

Creating safer spaces in classrooms also requires addressing the professional and ethical obligations for teachers in Ontario as outlined by the Ontario College of Teachers.

Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession

CARE	RESPECT	TRUST	INTEGRITY
The ethical standard of care includes compassion, acceptance, interest, and insight for developing students' potential. Members express their commitment to students' well-being and learning through positive influence, professional judgment, and empathy in practice.	Intrinsic to the ethical standard of respect are trust and fair-mindedness. Members honour human dignity, emotional wellness, and cognitive development. In their professional practice, they model respect for spiritual and cultural values, social justice, confidentiality, freedom, democracy, and the environment.	The ethical standard of trust embodies fairness, openness, and honesty. Members' professional relationships with students, colleagues, parents, guardians, and the public are based on trust.	Honesty, reliability, and moral action are embodied in the ethical standard of integrity. Continual reflection assists members in exercising integrity in their professional commitments and responsibilities.

Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession

Commitment to Students and Student Learning	Members are dedicated in their care and commitment to students. They treat students equitably and with respect, and are sensitive to factors that influence individual student learning. Members facilitate the development of students as contributing citizens in society.
Leadership in Learning Communities	Members promote and participate in the creation of collaborative, safe, and supportive learning communities. They recognize their shared responsibilities and leadership roles in facilitating student success. Members maintain and uphold the principles of the ethical standards in these learning communities.
Ongoing Professional Learning	Members recognize that a commitment to ongoing professional learning is integral to effective practice and to student learning. Professional practice and self-directed learning are informed by experience, research, collaboration, and knowledge.
Professional Knowledge	Members strive to be current in their professional knowledge and recognize its relationship to practice. They understand and reflect on student development, learning theory, pedagogy, curriculum, ethics, educational research and related policies, and legislation to inform professional judgment in practice.
Professional Practice	Members apply professional knowledge and experience to promote student learning. They use appropriate pedagogy, assessment and evaluation, resources, and technology in planning for and responding to the needs of individual students and learning communities. Members refine their professional practice through ongoing inquiry, dialogue, and reflection.

» Additional Resources

See other resources in the Catholic Teachers' Safer Spaces Series, including:

- [Reflection Tool – Checklist for Safer Spaces](#)
- [Understanding Trauma](#)
- [Intent vs Impact](#)
- [Moral Elements of Care](#)

See other resources in the Catholic Teachers' Mental Health and Wellness Series, including:

- [Understanding Stress](#)
- [Understanding Anxiety and Depression](#)
- [Strategies to Promote Mental Health and Wellness](#)
- [Additional Resources - Mental Health and Wellness](#)