

A WELCOME SPACE FOR TAKING RISKS

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY
CREATES A POSITIVE CLIMATE
FOR LEARNING

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Have you noticed that the same professional learning can be transformative in one school yet have seemingly no impact in another? There are a lot of reasons for that difference, and many of them have to do with the climate for teacher learning in the school.

Just as a teacher creates a classroom learning climate that can promote student learning, a school leader can create a climate for teacher learning. Some of the social and emotional components of that adult learning climate are strikingly similar to key components of the classroom learning climate. Warm and authentic relationships with others, access to trusted peers to scaffold and validate learning, and opportunities to take risks and make mistakes without ridicule help us all learn, no matter whether we are children or adults.

Principals and professional learning

leaders can take specific steps to create a conducive teacher learning climate before embarking on a new professional development program and can ensure that professional learning experiences maintain this climate during coaching and group sessions. But, too often, education leaders worry about how they are going to get teachers to *implement* a new practice rather than focusing on how to engage teachers in positive *learning experiences*.

There are key social and emotional aspects of the school's learning climate that can indicate to teachers that this is a safe place to engage in deep and meaningful learning. One of those key aspects is psychological safety, a concept that has grown out of research in the business sector but has major implications for schools.

Psychological safety is the feeling that you can tolerate — and even feel comfortable with — an inherently uncomfortable situation. When adults feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to take risks, ask questions, welcome diverse opinions, and generate more productive and creative solutions to problems (Edmondson & Roloff, 2009; Foldy, Rivard, & Buckley, 2009; Watson, Kumar, & Michaelsen, 1993). In other words, they are more likely to engage in deep and meaningful learning.

Psychological safety is important for educators because trying a new teaching practice can feel uncomfortable, especially when doing so in front of colleagues, when being evaluated on performance, or when there is a perception that professional identity is being threatened. Discomfort is a problem when it is overpowering and leads to disengagement, but feeling uncomfortable is not necessarily a problem. In fact, it can be a positive experience if it pushes us to grow, develop, and build resilience (Wanless, 2016).

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS LEARN ABOUT MATH

In a National Science Foundation-funded project, early education teachers used Simple Interactions to improve their teaching of math and social-emotional skills. The teachers learned to engage with children using *Peg + Cat*, an animated math-based PBS television show accompanied by games and resources. They also participated in Simple Interactions learning sessions that included video clips of them working with children on the math resources.

Reflecting on the experience, one teacher said, "I learned from seeing myself up there that what I am doing is what I am supposed to be doing. It's so different to see yourself doing something positive. It's a good thing."

A school director said, "It was so nice to know that what we do is validated. ... What we do does matter." This group of educators, from four different schools, did not know each other before the project but were able to use the safety and trust built within the group to explore practices and learn from one another.

One major goal in creating a school climate for teacher learning is to create a sense of psychological safety: a sense that it is alright to enter a state of discomfort together because we have warm relationships with trusted peers who will support us as we take risks and learn together.

SIMPLE INTERACTIONS

An example of why psychological safety is important, and how it can be

fostered, can be found in the Simple Interactions approach to professional learning. Simple Interactions, a program of the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media, based at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, helps educators and other adults build connections with the children and youth they serve.

Originally developed for early childhood teachers and later expanded to include K-12 and informal educators, it is based on the understanding that children's learning and growth are built on a foundation of consistent responsive and reciprocal adult-child interactions.

Recent research (Akiva, Li, Martin, Horner, & McNamara, 2016) focuses on four essential ingredients of supportive adult-child interactions: connection, reciprocity, inclusion, and opportunity to grow. In learning sessions, educators and those who coach and support educators explore a theoretical and practical framework on how to identify and understand positive daily interactions with children as the active ingredients of teaching.

The major task of Simple Interactions' practice-based and theory-informed process is to capture these relationship features on video and emphasize them in professional learning. The goal is to amplify these practices within small peer groups that can discuss, understand, and disseminate these four critical elements of developmental interactions.

Simple Interactions facilitators videotape teachers in their own classrooms to capture existing and emerging practices that embody these relationship dimensions and encourage teachers to use them more often. Video clips allow educators to view their own practice, something they rarely have an opportunity to do, and creates a space for educators to reflect, notice, and wonder about interaction moments that

contribute to the overall practices of educating children. Ideally, these clips help teachers to see strengths they had not noticed before and find ways to build on them.

Videos can also be intimidating, especially for those of us who are not used to seeing ourselves onscreen or talking about our practice with others. Because Simple Interactions participants share video from their own practices with the group, it is important to work toward a safe and trusting environment for learning and growing together.

Simple Interactions is built on the importance of relationships and developmental interactions between adults and children, but the same kind of developmental relationships support the learning and growing of adults who work within an education system. The foundational tenets of the Simple Interactions approach (connection, reciprocity, inclusion, and the opportunity to grow) are universally applicable to all developmental interactions that result in the building of human relationships, and ultimately, learning.

HOW SAFE IS YOUR SCHOOL?

Psychological safety is a feeling, although we might infer it from noticing certain behaviors in our staff. Staff meetings are one place that can be useful for noticing how safe your adult learning climate feels.

Based on research by Brian Pentland and colleagues, Daniel Coyle (2018, pp. 14-15) describes five behaviors in a staff meeting that indicate psychological safety:

- Everyone in the group talks and listens in roughly equal measure, keeping contributions short.
- Members maintain high levels of eye contact, and their conversations and gestures are energetic.

- Members communicate directly with one another, not just with the team leader.
- Members carry on back-channel or side conversations within the team.
- Members periodically break, go exploring outside the team, and bring information back to share with others.

These signals are not the only indicators of psychological safety, but give a hint as to whether everyone feels included and able to speak up and engage in the work of the group. Likely, that engagement will transfer to a professional learning setting as long as staff agree that the goals for learning are valuable.

Sometimes, though, looking for visible signs of psychological safety is not enough to get the full picture. Talk to teachers directly to hear how they are feeling. By having one-on-one or small group conversations, you can quickly get an accurate assessment of their perceptions and convey to them that you care about creating a safe workplace.

In that sense, these conversations may be both an assessment and the beginning of an intervention to improve the climate. When teachers know you care about how they feel at work, they may begin to recognize your efforts and be more responsive to them.

When you are talking with teachers, there are questions that might be useful for guiding the conversation. Researcher Amy Edmondson created seven statements about psychological safety that we have adapted for use with teachers (Edmondson, 1999). Although they were meant for use in a written questionnaire, these statements might help get the conversation going. (Note: Endorsing the first four statements would indicate a sense of psychological safety, and the last three indicate the opposite.)

1. Teachers at this school are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
2. Teachers at this school feel it is safe to take a risk (e.g. trying something new in the classroom).
3. No teachers at this school would deliberately act in a way that would undermine my teaching.
4. Working with teachers at this school, my unique skills and talents are valued and used.
5. If you make a mistake at this school, it is often held against you.
6. People who work at this school sometimes reject others for being different.
7. It is difficult to ask other people who work at this school for help.

We used these statements in a written survey to figure out how teachers' sense of psychological safety might relate to their readiness to engage with a new professional learning program. When assessing almost 100 teachers, we found that teachers' ratings on these seven items were highly related to readiness (Wanless, 2018).

We also found that teachers used the whole range of responses (on a scale from completely disagree to completely agree), showing variability in how psychologically safe teachers feel, sometimes even within the same school. This suggests that, although there are moves that a school leader can take to promote school climates that feel safe, individual teachers may feel otherwise and figuring out how safe they feel may be key to getting new professional learning off to a good start.

FOCUS ON WHAT TEACHERS DO WELL

One of the ways Simple Interactions promotes psychological

safety is by focusing on what teachers already do well and value. Simple Interactions focuses on positive developmental interactions with children, something that already resonates with most teachers. It is based on positive deviance (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010), which originated in public health, and suggests that there are individuals who succeed in any community despite facing similar challenges as their peers.

Positive deviance focuses on how communities can identify these successful behaviors and plan ways to adopt them widely for the success of all. The positive deviants in education are those who, regardless of resource limitations and ongoing challenges, find ways to provide consistent developmental interactions for children in their care.

Through the Simple Interactions approach, these moments are highlighted as the innate strengths of child-serving adults to promote the development of children. When professional development programs align with teacher values, like Simple Interactions, teacher motivation for learning is higher and taking risks to try new teaching practice is more tolerable.

Regardless of what professional learning initiatives are happening at the time, school leaders can promote psychological safety by sending regular messages to staff that uncertainty, differing perspectives, and admitting difficulty are welcome.

One powerful way this can happen is for a school leader to be a role model and share his or her own challenges. Many leaders hesitate to display any signs of difficulty for fear of looking vulnerable when, in fact, sharing vulnerability tells teachers that they are safe to share mistakes and challenges as well. Over time, sharing vulnerabilities is what will likely lead to trusting teams of teachers that become adept at

learning and growing together.

Another way to let teachers know that differing perspectives are welcome is to be ready to handle criticism or counter-ideas. How will you respond when a teacher says your new idea for assessment is not working in his or her classroom? Getting defensive will let a teacher know that you are aiming for compliance, not team learning. But probing for more information and asking others for their thoughts will let a teacher know that your ultimate goal is growth and development of high-quality teaching practices.

Overall, research and our experiences with schools point to one strong message: Creating a psychologically safe climate at school matters for adult learning in the same way that it matters for children's learning. School leaders can help teachers feel safe to take risks, share differing opinions, and be vulnerable in front of colleagues before and during professional learning activities, which can impact a program's success. This aspect of leadership can make a school feel like a productive place for everyone to learn.

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