



Safe space in intercultural education – how to create and maintain it in youth work?

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Introduction

Modern Poland, although for decades it was considered a relatively culturally homogeneous country, has been experiencing intense social change for several years. The war in Ukraine, which began in 2022, has contributed to the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees, including schoolchildren. At the same time, there is a growing number of expats – students, professionals and employees from different countries, coming to Poland on international exchanges, professional programs and business projects. These changes affect the daily life of educational institutions and require a new approach to working with culturally diverse groups. Intercultural education, Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak points out, is a process of learning and teaching that takes into account cultural diversity and seeks to enhance equity, dialogue and mutual respect.

Leeman and Reid (2006), on the other hand, emphasize that this education fosters the conscious coexistence of different groups and the breaking down of barriers resulting from prejudice and stereotypes. In practice, this means not only knowledge of other cultures, but above all an attitude of openness and readiness to cooperate. The key concept here becomes intercultural readiness – a set of competencies and personality traits that make it possible to work effectively in a multicultural environment. This applies not only to students, but especially to educators who shape the learning space. One of the most important elements of this space is psychological safety – the ability to be oneself, make mistakes, ask questions and learn in an atmosphere of trust.

What is Intercultural Readiness?

Intercultural readiness is a set of attitudes, skills, and knowledge that enable individuals to function effectively in culturally diverse environments. It includes, among others, empathy, awareness of bias, openness to diversity, intercultural communication skills, and the ability to adapt and reflect. This is a particularly important competence when working with young people, whose life experiences and identities are becoming increasingly complex. Readiness is not an innate trait – it can (and should!) be developed through experience, education, and relationships. A safe space is one of the foundations for building this readiness – it is precisely in such spaces that young people can practice empathy, engage in dialogue, and learn to coexist in diversity.

What is a safe space

A safe space (safe space) is not only a physical place, but first and foremost a relationship and mood based on respect, openness and trust. In such a space, young people have the right to:

- be themselves
- express opinions (including unpopular ones),
- make mistakes and learn from them,
- challenge norms and stereotypes,
- ask “difficult” questions,

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This does not mean an absence of conflict – on the contrary, differences of opinion are natural and can be a source of valuable learning. However, how they are resolved determines whether young people feel safe and can thrive. As Arao and Clemens (2013) note, a safe space is not about avoiding difficult topics, but about creating an environment where differences can be openly expressed and discussed in an atmosphere of courage and responsibility. Zembylas (2015), on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of emotion and empathy as key ingredients in building a space where students can develop their identity and social competence without fear of evaluation.

How to create a safe space in practice

Creating a safe space in youth work, especially in the context of intercultural education, is a process that requires conscious action, attentiveness and reflection on the part of the educator. It is not just about avoiding conflict, but about building relationships based on trust, mutual respect and the ability to express oneself without fear of evaluation. As research shows (Arao & Clemens, 2013), truly safe spaces are not those in which there is silence and agreement, but those in which participants can speak openly about their beliefs, experiences and concerns – including when they are difficult for others.



In practice, this means equipping the educator with specific strategies and tools to support dialogue, empathy and dealing with tensions. Particularly in non-formal education – workshops, youth clubs or volunteer activities – relationship and group atmosphere are the foundation for effective learning. As Zembylas (2015) notes, a safe space also requires an educator's willingness to embrace “uncomfortable emotions” and guide the group through processes that are not always predictable, but have great transformative potential.

In the following sections, we outline specific practices that help create a safe space – from collaborative rule-setting to attitude modeling to methods that foster dialogue and shared responsibility.

1. Joint rule-making

At the very beginning of work with the group, it is worth developing a contract – a set of rules that will apply to all participants.

It is important to:

- were established jointly, not imposed,
- were visible (e.g., written on a poster or slide),
- were specific (e.g., “we don't interrupt each other”, “everyone has the right to remain silent”),
- were regularly reminded and updated.

The result: participants have a sense of influence and responsibility, which strengthens their commitment and sense of security.

2. Attitude modeling by educator

The educator is a role model – his way of speaking, reacting and listening influences the whole group.

Worthwhile:

- show authenticity (“I don't know” is fine too),
- ask questions instead of making judgments,
- respond respectfully even to difficult statements,
- consistently reinforce the value of each statement.

Result: Participants learn by observation and imitate attitudes that foster dialogue.

3. Accepting imperfection and emotion

Conversations about cultural differences often evoke emotions.

The key is:

- naming emotions and giving them space,
- avoiding judging people, focusing on the situation,
- joint reflection (“what can we get out of this?”).

Effect: The group develops emotional resilience and the ability to cope with tensions.



4. Methods to support dialogue and safe space

The wheels of dialogue

This is a structured method of conversation in which each participant has a chance to speak without being interrupted. Everyone sits in a circle and speaks in a set order.

Application example: At the end of the workshop, the educator asks the question, “What moved me the most today?” Each participant shares his or her reflection.

Effect: *Strengthening equality of voice, listening without judging, and building trust in the group.*

Empathy maps

A visual tool that allows you to “step into the shoes” of another person.

Example of use: young people work in pairs. Each person takes on the role of a character from a selected minority (e.g., migrant, LGBTQ+ person, person with a disability) and answers questions: “What does he hear, see, feel, what is he afraid of?”

Result: *Development of empathy and the ability to take another person's perspective.*

Exercises with perspective

Cultural simulations, role change, role play.

Application example: *Participants act out a scene: a new student does not know the language. The group presents the situation from the perspective of the student, teacher and classmates.*

Result: *Understanding the mechanisms of exclusion, developing sensitivity and creativity in finding solutions.*

Techniques of active listening

Paraphrasing, questioning, confirming emotions.

Example of application: *During a heated discussion, the educator interrupts and says: “Do I understand correctly that you feel anger because...?” or “Can you elaborate on what you said?”*

Effect: *Participants feel listened to and understood, which reduces tensions and promotes cooperation.*

Working with metaphor and symbol

Facilitates talking about emotions and values.

Application example: *The educator asks: “What color was today?” or “If you had to choose one animal to describe today's atmosphere - what would it be and why?”*

Effect: *Deepening reflection, emotional integration and opening up of participants.*

Brainstorming without evaluation

Quickly generate ideas without commenting.

Application example: The group is to come up with 10 ways to help a new person feel feel more comfortable in the classroom. All ideas are written down, without grading.

Effect: *Strengthening the sense of influence and creativity, lowering the fear of being wrong.*

What threatens the safe space?

A safe space is not something given once and for all - it is a dynamic relationship that requires constant care, attention and nurturing. Even the best-designed environment can be disrupted if participants do not feel confident that their needs are heard and respected. As Megan Boler (1999) notes, education, which has transformative potential, always carries the risk that tensions will arise - and how an educator addresses them is crucial to maintaining a climate of trust.

Threats to a safe space are often not spectacular - rather, they are small but repetitive signals: failing to respond to disturbing comments, failing to notice a participant's emotions, or overlooking certain voices. These can build up over time and lead to withdrawal, blocked openness or deepening divisions in the group.

In particular, it is worth avoiding such situations as:

- **Failure to respond to microaggressions, stereotypes, exclusionary comments** - silence at such moments is sometimes interpreted as acquiescence.
- **Favoring certain participants** - e.g., by allowing them to speak more often or unconsciously reinforcing their opinions.
- **Bagatelizowanie trudnych emocji** - np. poprzez powiedzenie „nie przesadzaj”, „nie było tak źle”.
- **Lack of clear rules and consequences** - causes chaos and lack of a sense of justice.

The educator therefore has a dual role: facilitator of the dialogue and guardian of the space. He or she is responsible for building and maintaining a framework in which a diversity of opinions, communication styles and emotions can be safely present. As Freire (1970) emphasizes, education is a process of collaborative consciousness-building - and this is not possible without actively responding to what disturbs equality and mutual respect.



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Summary

Creating a safe space is not a luxury, but the foundation of effective education – especially in the context of diverse, multicultural groups. In a world where young people face daily challenges related to migration, identity, or exclusion, **a sense of security, acceptance, and respect becomes the key to personal and social development.**

A safe space **does not mean avoiding difficult topics** – on the contrary, it is precisely where important, sometimes uncomfortable conversations can take place in an atmosphere of openness, empathy, and mutual listening. It is a space where young people learn that diversity doesn't have to divide – it can inspire. That's why it is worth investing in building such environments. **This is where authentic intercultural education is born** – not in theory, but in relationships, experience, and the courage to be yourself while showing respect for others. Raising young people in this spirit prepares them for life in a world that needs more dialogue than ever before.

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