

CHAPTER 3

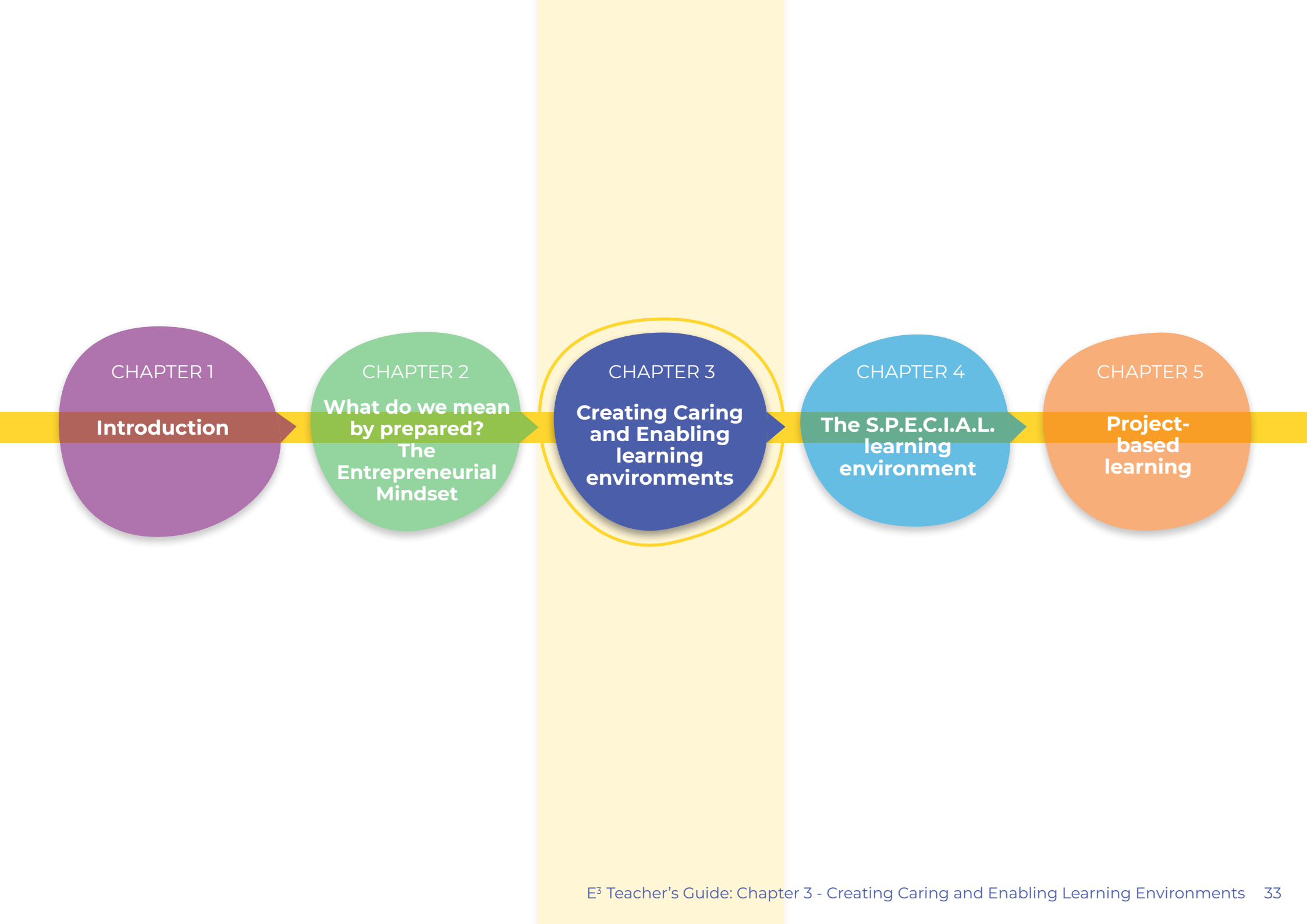
Creating Caring and Enabling learning environments



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Department:
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The LEGO Foundation



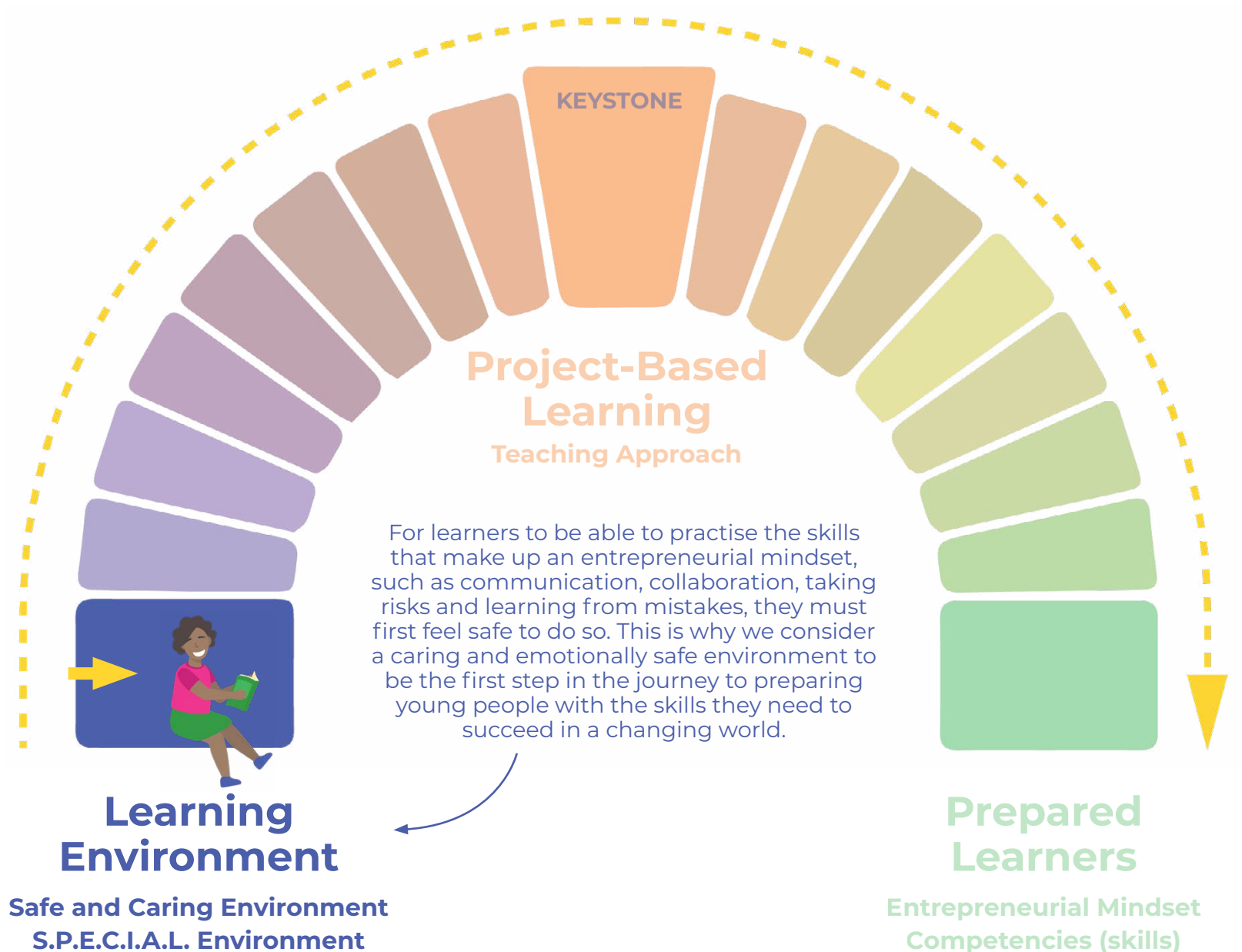


Creating Caring and Enabling learning environments

In education, improving WHAT and HOW we teach takes up a lot of our attention, but the atmosphere or environment in which teaching and learning happen, is equally important. Learners and teachers flourish in environments where they feel safe and cared for, and where the habits of lifelong learning are enabled.

Creating caring and enabling environments are so important to the successful implementation of Project-based Learning that they are considered non-negotiables that must be in place before effective Project-based Learning can even begin.

We are going to start by exploring the importance of a CARING and ENABLING environment in the process of learning.



The caring learning environment: What, Why and How

To get you into a learning frame of mind, we invite you to think back on your experiences at school and reflect on these questions.

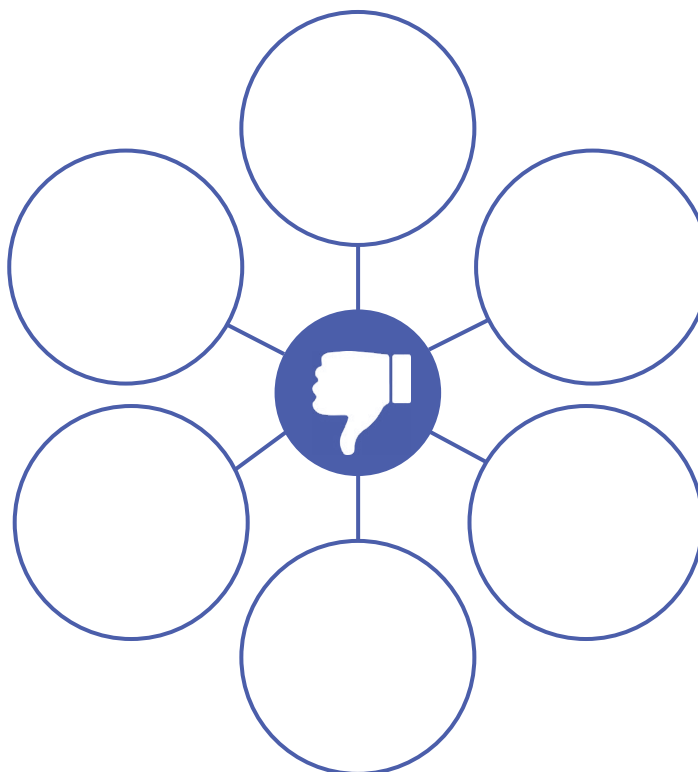
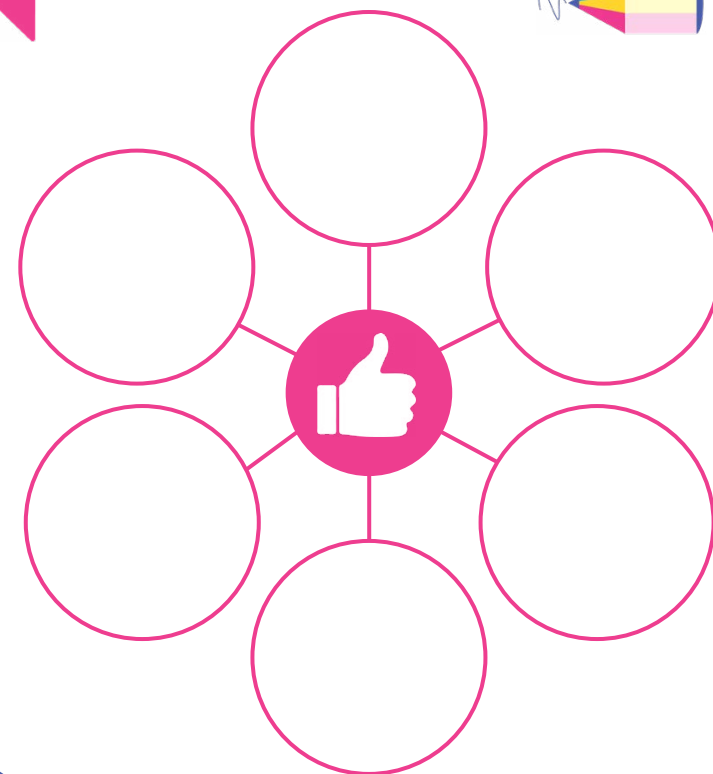
Questions for reflection



ACTIVITY: Memories of teachers

Teachers have a lot of power over learners. Some use this power to ignite the fires of lifelong learning but sadly others use it in a more abusive and destructive way. Think back to your schooldays and your teachers.

In the bubble map on the right, list how you FELT in the classes of the teachers you loved and respected and who made learning a joy.



In the bubble map on the left, list how you FELT in the classes of the teachers who did the opposite - who made school a misery.

What are caring learning environments?

“The attitude of the facilitator has almost entirely to do with climate. How can I create a psychological climate in which the child will feel free to be curious, will feel free to make mistakes, will feel free to learn from the environment, from fellow students, from me, from experience. How can I help him/her recapture the excitement of learning that was natural in infancy?”

Carl Rogers. Person-centred learning: Freedom to Learn.

A caring environment is tightly linked to psychological safety, i.e., the safety of the mind and the emotions (as opposed to the physical body). Psychological safety is essential for optimal learning in the classroom and throughout life. It can be explained as:

...the belief that you will not be humiliated or teased for the ideas you offer, for asking questions and admitting to mistakes. When cultivated in the classroom, learners don't worry about looking stupid, as the whole class knows that asking questions and making mistakes is crucial to learning.

(<https://blog.innerdrive.co.uk/psychological-safety-in-the-classroom>)

Scenario 1: Ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer



Questions for reflection



ACTIVITY: What do you think?

This scene may have connected to your memory of a teacher who made you feel miserable. Reflect on these questions to take your understanding of the effects of caring and uncaring environments a bit deeper.

Why do you think Lebo asked the question?

What emotions did he feel right after this interaction?

Do you think he will even ask another question?

How do you think he feels about his teacher? How has the relationship been affected?

What do you think the other learners learnt from this interaction?

Do you think an experience like this would improve the behaviour of learners?


Scenario 2: There is no such thing as a stupid question



These pictures show the effect on learning in uncaring, unsafe environments as opposed to learning in caring and emotionally safe environments. Uncaring, unsafe, and often toxic learning environments can discourage all but the most basic elements of learning. Learning environments that are caring and supportive, however, encourage wide and deep holistic learning.

Why are caring environments so important for learning?

Creating caring and emotionally safe environments has many benefits that go beyond the teaching and learning of the curriculum.

An infographic featuring eight stylized trees with yellow circular canopies and pink trunks, set against a white background with a green grassy base at the bottom. Each tree's canopy contains a text box describing a benefit of caring environments. The trees are arranged in a scattered pattern across the page.

They encourage curiosity, exploration and discovery, which are all drivers of deep and lifelong learning.

They allow for Collaboration, Communication, Critical thinking, and Creativity that are so necessary for the Entrepreneurial Mindset.

They lead to happier learners and teachers.

They reduce absenteeism because learners want to come to school and learn.

They maintain or even boost learners' self-esteem and self-worth.

The minds of learners in emotionally unsafe classrooms are closed for learning, whereas the minds of learners in caring and safe classrooms are wide open for learning.

They improve discipline as learners in caring and safe classroom environments like their teachers more. They tend to respect and trust their teachers. Because of this positive, emotionally safe relationship, they will then behave better.

They build relationships based on mutual respect.

If we are to fulfil our purpose as educators, then creating caring and safe learning environments should be non-negotiable. If you are starting your Project-based Learning journey with **Collaboration, Communication, Critical thinking, and Creativity** at the core, this is especially important. These competencies cannot and will not grow in environments where learners feel (or even sense) emotional danger.

Closed for learning



Anxious

LONELY

Scared

Unvalued/ignored

HUMILIATED

Withdrawn or aggressive

DISINTERESTED

unmotivated

FEAR OF FAILURE

Sad

Resists school

suffers in silence

Open for learning



Supported

heard

Curious

VALUED

Healthy response to mistakes

ASKS FOR HELP

*Eager to know
more and do more*

Learns in
and out
of school

LOVES LEARNING

**Experiments with
knowledge (thinkers)**

Stable self-confidence

How to create caring and safe environments



*I'm not prepared for this...
Have I destroyed all the learners I
have ever taught?
It's too much to think about...
I'm a terrible teacher...
Do I do enough?*

If you now have these thoughts spinning around in your head, then congratulations! These thoughts show that you are compassionate and concerned. They show that you think about how your actions as a teacher can affect your learners. There is every chance your learners are in a great learning environment. But if you are feeling unsure, not to worry – help is on the way.

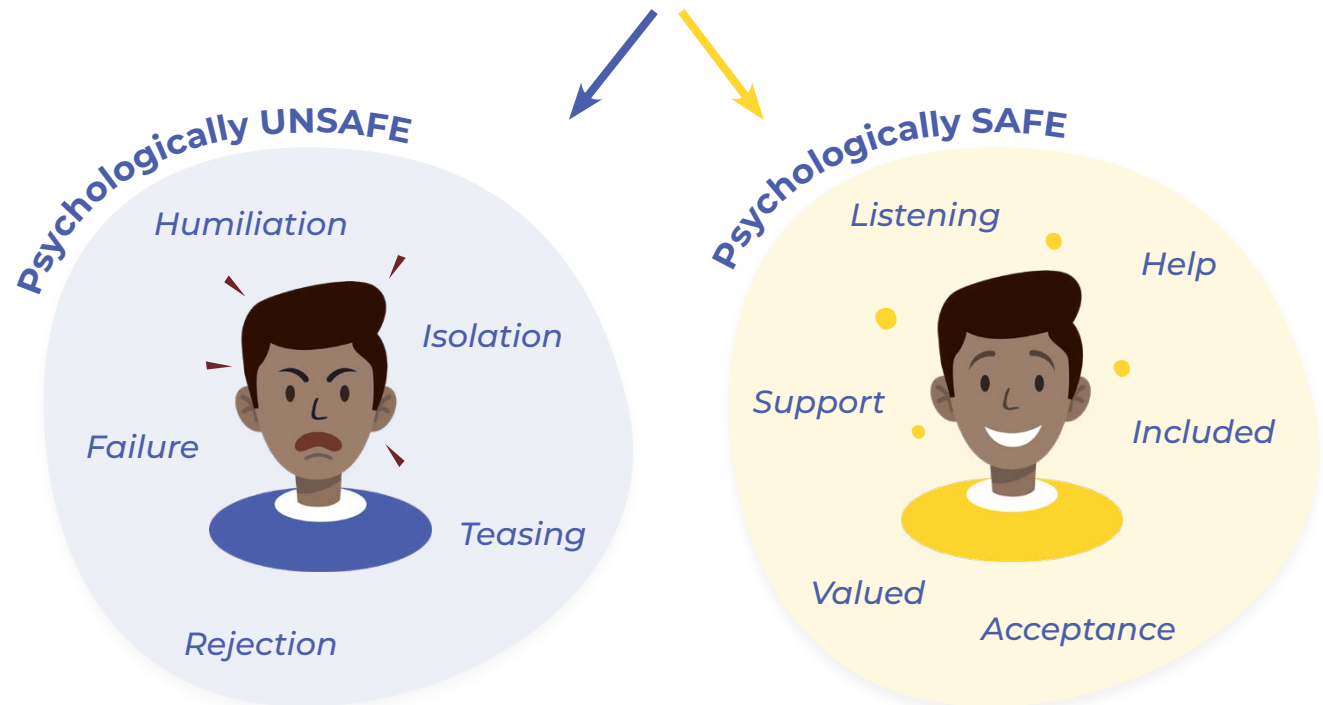
Before learning more about how to create these wonderful learning environments, let's pause and explore some of the myths and facts about caring and emotionally safe environments.

Myth 1: Teachers must become psychologists

Fact: Creating a caring and safe environment, doesn't mean you become a psychologist responsible for solving your learners' problems. For many learners, a safe classroom is the only safe space they have and just being in this space reduces some of their stress – or at a minimum, it doesn't make their tough situation any worse.



What learners can bring to the classroom:



Myth 2: Caring and safe environments mean we protect learners from all tough feelings and make sure they feel happy all the time.

Fact: Creating caring and safe classrooms is not about avoiding hard feelings. It is not about protecting learners from ever experiencing difficult emotions. Rather, it's about creating a space where learners feel safe enough to:

- grapple with challenges,
- struggle to understand complicated concepts,
- feel frustrated, angry, or helpless,
- take chances and
- make mistakes.

Myth 3: If teachers are friendly and pleasant, learners will not respect them, and they will behave badly.

Fact: Think about your own relationships and experiences with people: do you disrespect people who are friendly? Probably not! Imagine the story of two bosses: One is aggressive, disrespectful, rules by fear and often humiliates staff.

Boss Two is open to listening to your point of view, and is forgiving, approachable and supportive. Which boss would motivate you to do your best? Which boss would you respect? Kindness is not weakness!

Myth 4: Caring and safe classrooms have no discipline

Fact: The complete opposite is true. In caring and safe classrooms, there are firm but fair rules that are consistently enforced. The purpose of these rules is not to 'control and command', but to ensure a respectful and collaborative learning environment. An example of such a rule is: "Listen attentively and be open to the opinion of others."

The next statement may shock you, but the classroom rules that are followed the most, are those that are created by learners and teachers collaboratively. Not only is this a perfect opportunity to model Collaboration, one of the competencies that make up the Entrepreneurial Mindset, it usually improves behaviour as learners are less likely to ignore or fight against rules they had a part in creating.

Myth 5: Creating caring and safe spaces can be expensive

Fact: Creating caring safe spaces in schools is not at all about buying resources or learning a new teaching approach. It is all about developing respectful relationships between teachers and teachers, teachers and learners, and learners and learners. While everyone in a classroom contributes to this sense of safety and the maintaining thereof, the first step usually rests with you, the teacher, and your actions and attitudes. We know learners are often not listening, but they are watching!

With this in mind, here are some ideas to get you started.



They may not be listening, but they are watching!





Thinking out of the box: Punishment vs. Caring and Emotional safety

“Where did we ever get the crazy idea that in order to make children do better, first we have to make them feel worse. Think of the last time you felt humiliated or treated unfairly. Did you feel like co-operating or doing better?” (Dr Jane Nelson)

Think about this quote in the context of the discipline procedures in your classroom or even your school. We know that poor discipline and bad behaviour are serious concerns in many schools and often become a barrier to teaching and learning. Many people believe that harsher and harsher punishment or even corporal punishment is the answer. But what if we tackled the problem of discipline with care and emotional safety instead?
What do you think?

Questions for reflection

ACTIVITY: How caring and safe is your classroom?

Imagine if young Lebo asked the question, “Can we fly to the sun?” in your class. How would the learners respond? How would you respond? How caring and safe is your classroom?

Notes

