Unravelling the ‘Safe’ Concept in teaching: what can we learn from teachers’ understanding?

*Turner, S. and Braine, M. (2015) Pastoral Care in Education*

Sarah Turner (corresponding Author)
Design School,
Loughborough University
Loughborough
Leicestershire
LE11 3TU
England
Tel: 01509 222784
Email: S.Turner4@lboro.ac.uk

Margaret Braine
Trent College
Derby Road
Long Eaton
Nottinghamshire
NG10 4AD
Tel: 0115 8494949
Email: Margaret.Braine@trentcollege.net

Abstract
The word ‘safe’ is widely used in everyday education speak in phrases such as ‘safe learning environment’ but how do trainee and experienced teachers interpret, understand and use this word in their everyday teaching? Teachers are acting as observers of pupils’ wellbeing and one of their roles in the classroom is to offer support to build relationships and enable pupils to achieve their best. This case study reports the use of the ‘safe’ concept by trainee and experienced teachers in England and uses Boostrom’s (1998) ‘Safe Spaces’ groupings to allow categorising of the qualitative results obtained. The majority of trainee teacher responses related to ‘safe’ meaning a classroom where no child is embarrassed about sharing their opinions/answers, where pupils are comfortable about taking risks in their learning and one which is rooted in mutual respect. Experienced teachers reported that a ‘safe’ classroom was where pupils could express their thoughts, feel comfortable and be safe from harm. This concept has been used by all participants in this study but differently. The findings could help develop teachers’ understandings to ensure the use of the word ‘safe’ is not limited and maximum impact within school is obtained. It could help all teachers to be fully aware of the broadness of the concept, especially that surrounding the ability to achieve due to the importance of feeling safe in lessons.

Key Words: safe, trainee teacher, teaching standards, emotional wellbeing.

1. Introduction

The concept of ‘Safe’ is widely used, and accepted, though not specifically defined, by educators and schools. In its simplest interpretation, it refers to pupils, and teachers, being physically safe. It is a school’s responsibility to ensure child safety (DfE, 2014) and the legal requirements to safeguard children are outlined by the Department for Education (DfE) (2014). NIDirect (2013) state children’s safety at school covers safety in lessons, health and safety policies, school trips, first aid and medical issues, school security and health-related issues. The safe use of technology is now an imperative agenda issue for schools (Harasim, 2012). However, more recently emotional safety (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), 2002, 2007) has been recognised and has formed a crucial agenda point in schools. Recently the Department for Education changed the terminology to ‘help children achieve more’ (DfE, 2014). This still embeds the underlying principles of recognising children’s wellbeing and its direct relevance to their achievement in schools.

There is a global rise in emotional and mental health issues amongst our young people (Segrott et al., 2013) and also concern regarding the wellbeing of teachers (Galton and MacBeath, 2008; Morgan et al., 2010; Turner et al., 2012; Newton, 2014). Awareness and interventions/support programmes for pupils and teachers with mental/emotional health problems (Rothi et al., 2008; Kidger et al., 2010; Bostock et al., 2011; Segrott et al., 2013) are topical research areas. However, this
article’s focus is on teachers’ understanding of the ‘safe’ concept and in particular, attention will be drawn to emotional safety and its impact on pupil and teacher wellbeing.

The current Teachers’ Standards for England (DfE, 2012) state that a teacher must ‘set high expectations which inspire, motivate and challenge pupils’. Within this first standard, the guidance states that teachers should ‘establish a safe and stimulating environment for pupils, rooted in mutual respect’. Clearly, this refers to the Department for Education’s general health and safety guidelines. Newton (2014) writes of the importance of enthusiasm to produce a positive atmosphere which in turn can help pupil learning. He also states that ‘…this positive atmosphere is conducive to effective teaching and also to teachers’ emotional wellbeing. While teaching is not simply about making students happy, there are times when this is conducive to productive thought such as being creative’ (Newton, 2014, p. 125). Students will be happy if they are feeling safe and will feel able to take creative risks if the atmosphere produced permits.

The appearance of the term ‘safe’ is not new in the Teachers’ Standards. Documenting its history shows that following The Department of Education and Science’s circular in 1989 outlining the criteria for initial teacher education courses, in 1992, the competences expected of newly qualified teachers was produced. This document focused on subject knowledge, pupil application, class management, assessment and recording of pupils’ progress and professional development. Within these statements, there was no mention of the word ‘safe’. However, 1998 saw the first set of Standards which trainees were required to demonstrate if they were to be awarded Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). In the first section, outlining knowledge and understanding, trainees must demonstrate that they ‘are familiar with subject-specific health and safety requirements, where relevant, and plan lessons to avoid potential hazards’ (DfEE, 1998, p. 10). In addition, in section 4 on teaching and class management ‘establish a safe environment which supports learning and in which pupils feel secure and confident’ (DfEE, 1998, p. 13). In 2002 there was a shift in the flexibility of the Qualifying to Teach (QtT) standards where in the teaching and class management section the following was written: ‘they organise and manage the physical teaching space, tools, materials, texts and other resources safely and effectively with the help of support staff where appropriate’ (DfES, Teacher Training Agency, 2003). Also, within the planning, expectations and targets section, ‘They select and prepare resources, and plan for their safe and effective organisation, taking account of pupils’ interests and their language and cultural backgrounds, with the help of support staff where appropriate’. Requirements were eased in the 2007 revision of the QTS standards; Q30 learning environment: ‘Establish a purposeful and safe learning environment conducive to learning and identify opportunities for learners to learn in out of school contexts’. Therefore these histories of Standards in England for initial teacher education show different foci for the term ‘safe’ showing
the breadth of the understanding and allowing individuals their own professional interpretation of this word.

If we were to attempt to define what is meant by a ‘safe’ classroom environment, a framework could be positioned around a ‘description of a classroom climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, express their views honestly, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours; safety in this sense refers to protection from psychological or emotional harm’ (Holley and Steiner, 2005, p. 50). Emotions must be viewed in both positive and negative terms, for both pupils and teachers, as they have many experiences and interactions within the school day, with each individual bringing their own emotional material into the mix. Sutton and Wheatley (2003) suggest the multi-componential processes of this term (which relate to teachers) are: a judgement involving some appraisal with significance for the individual; the subjective nature of the experiences such as joy or fear; physiological (for example racing heart beat) or facial expression to demonstrate when individuals experience different emotions. This highlights the importance of considering the complexity of emotions that both pupils and teachers may encounter as part of a typical school day, in themselves, and in others.

There is a dearth of literature relating specifically to this concept and its use in education. However, one paper, by Boostrom (1998), does explore the concept of ‘safe’ and explains that examining how the word is understood and interpreted in education (as a metaphor) is a ‘way of talking about teaching’ (p. 397) and that although it might seem unnecessary to explore such a term, the meaning is not as simple as one might think. Boostrom wrote concerning four instances of usage from American Educators and he draws on research to suggest there are 4 areas that can be outlined when considering the ‘safe space’, interpreted by us as ‘school setting’ or ‘classroom’. These are:

1 An isolated child comes to stand for all children (*freedom to express our individuality/embrace the human condition*)

2 The physical space of the classroom comes to stand for social connectedness (*the classroom space for the teacher and pupil*)

3 The ‘safe space’ is characterized as ‘comfortable’ (*where people want to be/others recognise differences based on experiences*)

4 Students in ‘safe spaces’ are said to do better work (*attainment/creative pupils/engaged/working pupils*).

These four areas will be explored in further detail in light of current literature surrounding these topics and how it could be explained in England.

1 An isolated child comes to stand for all children - Considering a Pupil’s Perspective of ‘Safe’ at School by being able to express their individuality
Within the school day, pupils are facing a number of new and difficult experiences. ‘On at least one morning in every student’s life, there was an attempt to find an excuse for not going to school. For some pupils, there might be fear about an element in the school setting’ (Hill and Hill, 1994, p. 43); these fears could be related to their fears associated with their learning, for example tests, facing consequences from the day before with staff or peers, reaction from classmates e.g. due to a new hair cut or ongoing torment from peers. Peer based bullying continues to be a concern despite anti-bullying policies within schools being a mandatory requirement by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2011). Additional consideration of e-safety is now in such policies as there are so many cases of bullying on-line through e-mails and social networking sites (Rivers and Noret, 2010; Harasim, 2012).

The aim must be for pupils to be emotionally safe and to have a secure sense of overall well-being. This can be defined as experiencing healthy self-esteem and feeling worthwhile and being able to contribute positively (Underdown, 2007). The Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) initiative in England, launched in 2003, focused schools on considering this area within lessons and school life. This links in with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1970). ‘Children who are healthy, emotionally and physically, have the energy and motivation to play, explore, experiment, learn and form relationships with others (Underdown, 2007, p. 4). Therefore, all these factors are necessary, from Maslow’s perspective and from defining wellbeing, to ensure pupils have every chance to succeed. ‘Students’ most basic relationship need is for emotional safety and protection, but from peers and teachers while at school, and also on the way there and back’ (Porter, 2000, p. 254).

2 The Physical Space of the Classroom comes to stand for Social Connectedness - Considering a Classroom Teacher’s Perspective

Teachers have their ‘space’ to teach. This space must allow the fostering of relationships with their pupils to ‘promote a sense of emotional well-being’ (Beamon, 2001, p. 3). Classrooms must also ensure pupils are physically safe from harm or potential hazards; moreover, adolescents also require a psychologically safe environment for them to be able to learn (Beamon, 2001). Today, increasing numbers of vulnerable pupils need ‘more emotional and social guidance to cope with social pressures and personal identity confusion’ (Beamon, 2001, p. 4). This can be difficult for teachers amongst other pressures and demands, particularly if they feel unqualified to deal with such issues. The issue of ‘emotional well-being’ can also be raised as paramount for teachers. Appropriate school policies for staff and relevant training could be offered to all individuals entering the school, with support and mentoring in place to foster their wellbeing and ensure they are able to carry out and sustain their complex roles effectively if needed within their classrooms. Essentially, teachers need to ‘feel right’ themselves (Riseborough, 1981, p.15).

Trainee teachers enter schools during their teaching practice placements and are faced with a multitude of new challenges. This in itself can be daunting. Edwards and
Protheroe (2003) state that ‘working alongside a more experienced teacher is a safe place from which one might learn to explore the potential for action in classroom events’ (p. 230). This additionally highlights that anyone in a ‘learning role’ requires a ‘safe’ learning atmosphere. One major aspect taught to trainee teachers is that of being ‘visible’ at school, ensuring doors are left open if speaking one to one to a pupil after school or ensuring another member of staff is in close proximity if providing additional tuition (Jones, 2004). This visibility is a ‘central strategy for ensuring that children are safe from adult sexual abuse and that teachers are safe from accusation of abuse…safe schools and classrooms is that visibility is not imposed, but actively and positively desired by teachers’ (Jones, 2004, p. 54).

Another area of growing concern for all teachers, at whatever stage in their profession, is that of mental health. ‘Teachers are often not confident in engaging with mental health issues and would like more training and support to assist them to do this effectively’ (Kidger et al., 2010, p. 931). Bostock et al.’s research (2013) concurs that teachers are ill-prepared for this role. It is the responsibility of the teacher to create a ‘safe’ space for adolescents, to personalise the learning opportunities given, build relationships with the pupils in their care and create an emotionally sound environment. Added to this is the concern for the mental health in children. Trying to fit mental health training into a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) year, for trainee teachers, or into training for experienced teachers, is difficult due to time constraints (Rothi et al., 2008). However, a recent House of Commons report (November 2014) states that ‘We recommend the Department for Education looks to including a mandatory module on mental health in initial teacher training, and should include mental health modules as part of ongoing professional development in schools for both teaching and support staff’ (http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/health-committee/news/14-11-04-camhs-report-substantive/). Findings by Bostock et al. (2011) showed that PGCE students were more likely to strongly agree that teachers have an important role to play in detecting the early signs of mental illness, if they have some training, hence this suggestion (from the House of Commons) seems a plausible suggestion. With some basic grounding in this field, trainee teachers could be able to demonstrate a very positive attitude towards their role in relation to the NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Hence, this could be an important area for teacher educators to consider.

3 The ‘Safe Space’ is characterized as ‘comfortable’ - A Whole School Perspective (linking to classrooms)

To enable a teacher to manage the everyday demands of their role and to persevere in the profession, they require the ability to have an awareness and understanding of their own emotional and psychological self. Teachers, like pupils, have essential human needs. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1970) illustrates this in very simple terms showing the importance for all to feel a sense of belonging and personal security. He describes all individuals as having a ‘deficiency’ of needs; this refers to
physical, emotional and psychological well-being. When, and if, these needs are met, a person’s desire to satisfy them will gradually cease. For teachers, some of these needs should be met by school leadership, with acknowledgement of hard work and success, support for professional development and an understanding of the specific demands of individual roles within the work place being crucial. This is clearly expressed in the work of Carl Rogers (1961, 1983) “His view was that the qualities and conditions most effective in enabling counsellors to support personal growth and emotional health in their clients were the same as those most likely to encourage growth and learning in schools.” (Braine, 2008, p. 14) This applies to both pupils and school staff. Rogers used the term ‘core conditions’ to refer to empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard, which he described as being essential for a healthy relationship that would encourage personal growth. In terms of education, he tended to refer to these conditions as ‘facilitative’. (Rogers, 1978, p. 88)

If the facilitative conditions are present educationally, Rogers suggested that pupils would have an innate tendency towards personal growth and the fulfilment of their potential, due to the best possible learning environment being provided. Rogers’ therapeutic approach “is a way of being that puts people at the centre of any human process and that this way of being could be used for all interpersonal relating.” (Hill, 1994, p. 18) This is also essential for staff development and retention. Day et al. (2007) report that to maintain teacher effectiveness,

Creating positive work conditions, meeting teachers’ professional and personal needs and minimizing teacher burnout, is the key to encouraging teachers’ resilience, promoting teacher well-being and positive professional life trajectories, improving the conditions for teachers’ effectiveness in relation to pupils’ performance, and ultimately, school improvement. (p. 214)

However, the state within many schools is summed up by Harris (2007);

It is my belief that despite working harder and longer hours to support children and to implement change, many teachers are pedalling against a policy current that appears so strong that teaching has become literally heart breaking and soul destroying work. (p. 2)

Hence, if a school is to be ‘safe’, it must prioritise the wellbeing of both staff and pupils.

4 Students in ‘Safe spaces’ are said to do better work – Consideration of Pupil Attainment

If teachers are to encourage pupils to meet the Department for Education’s aim of being able to ‘help children achieve more’ (DfE, 2014), the creation of this safe classroom is essential. This ‘safe’ classroom should allow for pupils ‘to grow
creatively and positively in both mind and spirit’ (Beamon, 2001, p. 10) and as Newton (2014) alludes towards, creating a space where pupils feel they can take risks (and teachers too to progress their own teaching skills) so that their learning can grow.

For pupils to contribute and take risks in their work, they require a ‘…purposeful and safe environment’ (QTS, 2007). However, ‘Unless students feel emotionally and physically safe, they won’t share real thoughts and feelings; discussions will be artificial and dishonest’ (Bigelow et al., 2001, p.3); this could prevent meaningful discussions on social issues or the sharing of knowledge (which could highlight misconceptions in pupils which reduce learning potential). Underdown (2007) states some useful characteristics of children’ emotional wellbeing by: children being open and receptive; flexible; self-confident and displaying self-esteem and being assertive. The challenge for teachers is being able to create this classroom environment as this is turn should improve pupils’ attainment in each subject.

To sum up

Consideration of the wide range of literature surrounding the ‘safe’ concept in terms of Boostrom’s work and the Department for Education (for England) policies provides a basis for understanding some of the broadness and complexities associated with the term. Boostrom’s work strongly correlates to the authors’ understandings and the literature search undertaken and hence was deemed an appropriate framework for analysing the results in this Case Study.

Pupil safety is paramount and would not be viewed as a new factor, but the emerging research reported on vulnerable pupils and their emotional safety does suggest some changes in the way schools operate. Likewise, exploration of teachers’ lives and their emotional and psychological safety requires some attention, so that teaching and learning can impact as positively as possible and that ultimately, good teachers are able to thrive in the profession. Therefore, it is useful to explore what practicing teachers think and understand of this terminology in their daily practice.

2. Methods

Research Questions:

1 How do trainee teachers interpret the term ‘safe’ within the Teachers’ Standards (2012) and in their teaching?

2 How do practising teachers interpret this term for themselves and their pupils?
This case study, small scale approach, based on an opportunistic sample, comprised of 24 Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) trainee teachers in secondary science and 8 experienced school mentors. The research undertook an interpretivism view due to the nature of the research questions being about what people think and how they form their ideas; how their worlds (in teaching) are constructed (Thomas, 2009, p. 75) based on this term.

This mixed methods approach was embedded with triangulation using questionnaires (both trainee and experienced teachers) and a group interview (only trainee teachers). The data were drawn from two perspectives: trainee teachers’ pre and post teaching practice interpretations and their understandings of the term ‘safe classroom’. Experienced teachers also shared their interpretations and understanding of the term. This open-ended question was given to trainees with 8 months experience of the classroom in between. The open-endedness was to allow full interpretation and exploration of the concept and no hints or guidelines offered. A group interview enabled trainee teachers to share their own perceptions based on how their views of the classroom had changed throughout the PGCE course. 10 trainee teachers voluntarily participated in this where the trainees were asked to share and reflect on how they felt their understanding of a safe classroom had changed during the course.

Boostrom’s (1998) paper, based on ‘safe spaces’, formed the baseline for this research. His four areas were used to categorise the responses given due to the strength of his four areas corroborating to our understanding, national policies and current literature search undertaken, despite it being written 15 years ago. This was deemed an appropriate method as a type of meta-analysis (looking at the analysis of other analyses, Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007) as there has not been a lot of work in the field and his paper was based on current research at the time. Boostrom’s paper suggest there are 4 areas that can be outlined when considering the ‘safe space’. These are:

1 An isolated child comes to stand for all children (freedom to express our individuality/embrace the human condition)

2 The physical space of the classroom comes to stand for social connectedness (the classroom space for the teacher and pupil)

3 The ‘safe space’ is characterized as ‘comfortable’ (where people want to be/others recognise differences based on experiences)

4 Students in ‘safe spaces’ are said to do better work (attainment/creative pupils/engaged/working pupils).

The qualitative data from the questionnaires will be presented in tables and linked to the descriptions above. Interview responses will also be tabulated and cross-
referenced to the questionnaire data to look for similarities and differences. Any general patterns will be teased out through the analysis process.

3. Results

Trainee teachers and experienced teachers were asked to comment on an open-ended question what they felt was a ‘safe classroom’. They could write this from either a pupil or teacher’s perspective.

The four areas described by Boostrom were all used for trainee teachers’ responses. However, trainee teachers did not respond to every area in their response. Each trainee gave a response which when analysed was grouped into one or two of the areas given. The first and third areas (Isolated child and ‘comfortable’ areas) were the most common qualitative responses provided. Providing the number of trainee teachers who responded to a term was deemed useful to quantify the commonality of the areas. A common theme in responses was of wanting to create a supportive environment and wanting pupils to feel comfortable there. Behaviour and routines were also mentioned, which is not surprising as these areas are taught and discussed throughout the trainee teachers’ programme. The least responses were with regard to pupils doing better work in this environment. To the authors, this would suggest there is a hope and expectation of creating a ‘safe’ classroom environment but a less secure understanding of the wider concept at this stage of teacher training.

Trainee Teachers Group interview Results *(n = 10 (end of second teaching practice))*

**Question 1 - insert table 3 about here**

These responses relate strongly to the qualitative responses given surrounding the importance of pupils being able to ask/answer questions, whether they are right or wrong, and for the pupils to be respected. Behaviour management featured more highly from the interview than from the written responses. There were no responses reported about pupils’ attainment or their creativity and therefore the category on ‘better work’ was not included.

**Question 2 – insert table 4 about here**

Table 4 shows that these responses each link to Boostrom’s categories and there is one in each of them except producing better work (like question 1). The trainee teachers wanted to feel comfortable and settled in a school and able to try new things in their teaching and not be unreasonably criticised. Viewing themselves as teachers in a school was not as well recognised or considered as an area to think about at this stage. From their limited experiences of school, their focus was on their pupils and their learning and not on themselves, so there was less reflection on what
they should, or should not, be experiencing. It is worth noting that schools provide a Mentor who acts as a ‘critical friend’, so trainee teachers have a point of contact to offer advice and support at all times. Some trainees were hesitant to share their thoughts for this question and were less sure of the school setting and their role in it; teachers thought more about their pupils than themselves.

**Triangulation of Trainee Teacher Data – insert table 5 about here**

Table 5 reports the overlaps of the categories across the two trainee teacher questionnaires and their interview. It highlights the key areas which are paramount to them for their pupils, especially where similar responses are apparent in every aspect of data. It also shows how their knowledge (possibly gained from their school experience) has changed some of their views, although this is not shown clearly (i.e. that the post trainee questionnaire and interview being most similar. Since most responses were about pupils it is not possible to triangulate the interview questions surrounding ‘staff’ issues.

**Experienced Teachers’ Results**

Experienced teachers’ responses (n = 8) described a ‘safe’ classroom as one which:

**Question 1 – insert table 6 about here**

There were no responses relating to pupils’ attainment or creativity. Their answers were dominated by the classroom space and physical safety.

**Question 2 – insert table 7 about here**

Experienced teachers described a ‘safe’ workplace (n=8) was described as one which:

Experienced teachers referred mostly to safety of their pupils and the right, comfortable atmosphere. From their teacher’s perspective, being comfortable and considering the classroom space was paramount. These teachers did not refer to their pupils doing better work in these classrooms.

The responses from all of the data gathered from this small scale project propose three categories that teachers understand and employ the term ‘safe’ in their everyday teaching.

Comparing trainee and experienced teachers reports the following for question 1:

- trainee teachers consider this to apply to ‘getting things wrong’ whereas experienced teachers want their pupils to express their thoughts and ideas;
- trainee teachers discuss teachers and pupils being happy in a calm and respectful environment whereas experienced teachers were general in stating a comfortable atmosphere was necessary;

11
• trainee teachers focussed on applying rules consistently whereas experienced teachers were focussing on safety in a physical sense and no bullying allowed.

Comparing trainee and experienced teachers’ responses for question 2 reports that:

• trainee teachers were commenting on not being unreasonably criticized by management; however experienced teachers wrote about expression of their thoughts and views;
• the physical spaces related to being physically safe and using their professional judgement in their teaching whereas experienced teachers wrote about Health and Safety documents and extreme behaviour being dealt with appropriately;
• trainee teachers wrote about not being bullied by other staff whereas experienced teachers wrote about getting along with staff, not feeling insecure and feeling comfortable going to work.

The closest overlap was that regarding being ‘comfortable’ at work and getting along with other members of staff. This clearly is paramount to both new and experienced teachers. Other comments do closely relate but there are differences to their understanding and expectation due to the more experience they have had.

Considering the results overall, the frequency of comments in three of the four Boostrom’s categories was apparent: isolated child comes to stand for all children; physical space and the classroom characterized as comfortable.

Discussion

Our analysis has focused on the qualitative data received from trainee and experienced teachers. The points raised fall into the four categories outlined by Boostrom (1998) and our discussion lies on expanding trainee teachers’ understanding of the concept of ‘safe’. This could be simply through their own reflections and observations in school, which mirror their own personality and classroom experience as a learner. Could much of this relate to their own professional identity that develops throughout a teaching career? Of the four areas raised by Boostrom, prior to their first teaching practice ‘mutual’ respect’ in the ‘safe space’ is characterized as comfortable element was the most common point made. This concurs with Bigelow at al.’s (2001) work stating that pupils will not share their real thoughts unless they feel emotionally and physically safe in the classroom. Also, Sankey’s work (1999) is important, stating that pupils need to feel they can get things wrong in order for them to go on to achieve. Post teaching practice, trainees also reported highly that ‘mutual respect’ was a clear feature required in their classroom. However, the most highly rated comment was in the ‘an isolated child comes to stand for all children’ section and trainees wrote about ‘no-one embarrassed to share opinions/answers’. Trainees appear to value the discussion aspect of lessons and pupils being able to talk openly to them. In both pre and post teaching practice
comments, trainee teachers’ responses generally fall into the ‘isolated child comes to stand for all children’ category, with their comments relating to being safe from bullying, being physically safe and feeling confident to ask/answer questions. Experienced teachers also value the importance of pupils expressing their thoughts and ideas.

‘Students in ‘safe spaces’ are said to do better work’ section received the least comments in both the pre and post trainee teachers’ responses. However, the comments are conducive for a productive environment such as able to be creative, learning and sharing, making mistakes and learning from them and feeling cared for as some examples. The physical space of the classroom seems less important post teaching practice than pre; for example, trainee teachers have recognised that pupil relationships and them feeling comfortable translates into better behaved pupils, and therefore helps behaviour management.

Interview responses were different when considering ‘safe’ for pupils and ‘safe’ for teachers. The emphasis for pupils related to them being happy and being able to try out new things and get them wrong. However, from a member of staff perspective, the trainees focused on not wanting to be overly criticised, being physically safe and not bullied. This agrees with Holley and Steiner (2005) who discuss the protection from psychological and emotional harm which directly links to the Teachers’ Standards (2012) ‘safe and stimulating environment’. This can, and should, be applied to both pupils and teachers so that both can maximise their potential. However, the results should be treated with caution as the timing of the interview, which took place at the end of two contrasting school placements, may have been fully based on their reflections on their workplace experience.

Experienced teachers referred mostly to the safety of their pupils and to creating the right, comfortable atmosphere. This could be due to their subject specific backgrounds and reflect the relationships these teachers have formed with their pupils. From the teacher’s perspective, being comfortable and considering the classroom space was paramount to a safe environment. The more experienced teachers recognised the necessity for the classroom environment to be comfortable as a way of encouraging pupils to share their ideas and be confident enough to take risks. These teachers did not specifically refer to their pupils doing better work in these classrooms, which is worthy of note. They did not refer to themselves or how they feel at school. This could be due to the sensitivity of these issues or a lack of recognition of the broadness of the term.

The limitations of this research are the small sample and not reflecting the whole population of the teaching profession (trainee and experienced science teachers involved only). More data from a teacher perspective would be useful to develop further understanding and explore in greater depth and detail more why teachers may leave the profession. What support is offered to staff concerning their workload
and managing pupil behaviour? To what extent is it ‘safe’ for teachers to be open about professional and personal worries and concerns?

Trainee teachers appear to understand that they have a responsibility to ensure that their lessons are accessible and approachable for all their pupils. Their different results (from experienced teachers) could be due to then having a Mentor in school which as Edwards and Protheroe (2003) state support them in their new school. This may change as their professional identity develops and they learn school policies. Therefore, is the development that is actually needed one which would make schools more humanistic, a more secure place to work and a place where feel valued to experience in the school community a safe place to be employed? This links in with research that schools are stressful places and that teachers do matter and are placed under considerable pressure. Stress levels for teachers usually relate to the ever growing workload, which can lead to dissatisfaction or burnout (Galton and MacBeath, 2008). This does highlight that Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs are not being met and that their wellbeing can be affected. Schools require (from all angles in the authors’ opinion) teachers who care and who ‘make a difference’ to the education of the whole student’ (Day et al., 2007, p. 1) and therefore working conditions and staff morale need to be considered as a priority by school managers if they are to achieve this. It is important to also consider emotional safety of the staff as well as that of the children.

Trainee and experienced teachers’ responses do fall into the four proposed categories from Boostrom. Each teacher has their personal response regarding what safety means to them and each, in this small study, have learnt strategies to provide their teaching environment which provides a safe space.

4. Conclusion

Trainee teachers interpret the term ‘safe’ within the Teachers’ Standards (2012), and their teaching, as being confident to ask/answer questions, to endorse clear routines in the classroom, mutual respect, welcome feeling in the classroom and being creative (pre teaching practice). Post teaching practice their responses surrounded pupils not being embarrassed to share their opinions, mutual respect, happy children and pupils taking risks. This strongly related to the interview responses and in terms of Boostrom’s categories, related to: an isolated child comes to stand for all children, comfortable and physical space being a place to stand for social connectedness.

Experienced teachers respond to the term ‘safe’ as referring to physical safety, no bullying, comfortable atmosphere and being able to express thoughts and ideas. For themselves as staff, they reported the school having health and safety policies, poor behaviour being dealt with effectively and children expressing their thoughts and view. Their responses strongly related to Boostrom’s physical spaces and the isolated child comes to stand for all children.
The research suggests of Boostrom’s four categories there are three well-known and acknowledged areas that the data can be categorised into. However, all of these categories are necessary for pupils to be able to achieve and for staff to be able to effectively teach; this could have a positive impact on their overall wellbeing. These, however, may require explicit explanations through training; this could be a suggestion for teacher educators to incorporate these categories into their general teacher elements of their courses. The understanding of this ‘safe’ concept, we believe, benefits all involved within education and therefore should be ameliorated so that all categories are fully understood. By having a better understanding, teachers would be effective due to feeling secure in their workplace, creative, well and their behaviour management should be easier because of better relationships with pupils. Pupils will be more likely to want to learn, attend school and be emotionally well. This might be a challenge (yet we would hope, an achievable goal) for all involved with education. Therefore, focussing on maximising the ‘safe’ experience for the benefit of pupils’ and teachers’ wellbeing has ultimately strong advantages for all involved in the learning process.

5. References


