

‘Examining Student Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Safe Spaces in Secondary Religious Education’

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Rationale and Background

Mental health and wellbeing is a fundamental issue in post covid education in Scotland with students struggling to engage and participate in secondary RE discussion and debates. Issues such as anxiety, school non attendance and mental health are prevalent, and in this study I wanted to examine student perceptions on the effect of ‘safe’ brave ‘civil’ and respectful classrooms in the secondary RE classroom environment.

Research questions

1. What do students consider to be a safe space in RE?
2. Does the terminology of ‘safe’ ‘brave’ ‘civil’ or ‘respectful’ space make a difference to the learners?
3. Can student engagement be improved through directly addressing the classroom environment?

Limitations

1. Practical concerns and limitations due to ongoing Covid mitigations, which restricted group work, co-operative learning opportunities and seating arrangements
2. A small sample bias with once a week lessons, due to it being core RE.

Methodology

A mixed method approach using pre and post intervention questionnaires, observation and case studies. Participants were chosen from an S1 cohort at the time, one of the age groups who had been impacted greatly by the COVID pandemic and had missed several traditional elements of the transition to high school, such as induction days to high school and after school clubs. This all took place in a high school in Dundee.

Findings

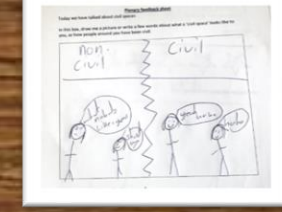
Five key themes of comfort, relationships, friendships, home and respect were identified from the data analysis of the student responses. Students identified ‘respectful’ spaces to be more important than ‘safe’ spaces and we have therefore changed our practise to encourage this environment.

Student voice

Case studies gave the opportunity to examine student reactions to our lesson content and provide more balanced views from across the spectrum of learning.

‘I think my friends would talk more (in RE) if they knew no one would laugh at them or joke about it later.’

‘I can be brave and argue with them (other students) and I know the teacher will help me and tell them they need to be respectfull’



Examples of student feedback on safe, brave, and civil spaces

Conclusions

Through the thematic analysis and case studies, we examined students perceived importance and criticism of safe, brave, civil and respectful spaces and found that perceived safety was a lower priority for students post covid than a culture of trust and respect. We need to reconsider safe space pedagogy and instead consider how we build inclusive and respectful classroom environments.

Recommendations

Further research is needed to examine the ongoing long-term effects of the Covid pandemic and subsequent school closures, and the effect on young learners in Scotland. Although many learners have returned seamlessly to education, for some students social and educational anxiety continue to act as barriers to learning. Continuing this research in an environment out with the RE classroom would be a natural next step