

BRINGING STUDENTS SAFELY IN AND OUT WHEN TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST

Creating a Safe Learning Environment: The Safely In, Safely Out Principle

When I was first trained as an Echoes & Reflections facilitator, I immediately gravitated to the Pedagogical Principles for Effective Holocaust Instruction. Understanding the intention and choices behind how we teach sensitive subjects is like rocket fuel for me as an educator. These principles have become my road map, shaping the way I write curriculum and guide my teaching. While all of the Echoes & Reflections principles resonate deeply, one in particular struck a profound chord with me: **Creating a Safe Learning Environment**, known within the Echoes community as the “**Safely In, Safely Out**” principle.

Our students enter our classrooms each day carrying a “bubble” of experiences, emotions, and narratives. These are shaped by their lives outside the classroom—their families, friendships, challenges, and joys. Some days, the bubble is light and beautiful. Other days, it is messy, heavy, and filled with uncertainty. But every day, that bubble enters with them, influencing how they engage with the content and the world around them.

I recall a story a friend shared about her son, who was going through his summer reading list when he encountered *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (please refer to this blog post if this is a text you are thinking about using in your classroom and I would strongly encourage teachers to be thoughtful about what books are assigned for summer reading lists). Midway through the book, he found himself in tears. He was not crying about the Holocaust per se, but about being separated from one’s parents, a theme that resonated deeply with him as his parents were going through a divorce. He missed his father’s daily presence, and the book triggered that emotion. Thankfully, his mother had created a safe space for him to process those feelings, but not all students have that opportunity or the emotional tools to navigate such vulnerability.

As educators, we must be mindful of the “bubbles” our students bring into the classroom. Whether we are teaching about the Holocaust, systemic injustice, or any other emotionally charged content, we have a responsibility to ensure our students walk **safely into** the material and **safely out** of it. This means crafting a learning environment that supports emotional well-being, fosters trust, and gives students the space to navigate difficult content in a healthy way.

Strategies for Walking Safely In and Safely Out of Difficult Content

Over the years, I've developed and gathered several strategies that allow students to engage with challenging material while feeling supported. These approaches, shared by educators across the country, help to create a classroom environment where students can safely process complex emotions.

1. Journaling

Create a routine at the beginning of the year where students can journal freely after engaging with challenging content. Whether it's reading a difficult text, watching a survivor testimony, or listening to a piece of music, journaling provides an outlet for students to process their emotions privately.

- **Consider:** Give students the option to crumple up their journal entries afterward. Only read their writing if they give explicit permission. This builds trust and signals to students that their emotional processing is respected and private.

2. Turn-and-Talk Partners

Establish "turn-and-talk" partners early in the term. These partners can act as a first line of support, allowing students to briefly share thoughts and emotions with a peer after engaging with difficult material.

- **Consider:** Regularly check in with students to ensure their partnerships are still supportive and functional. Offering this flexibility allows for continuous growth in the classroom's emotional dynamics.

3. Restorative Justice or Community Circles

Implement community circles at regular intervals. This collective practice creates a shared space for students to talk openly about how external events or classroom content affect them emotionally.

- **Consider:** Let your students call for a circle when they feel it's needed. Empowering students to take ownership of this process encourages emotional intelligence and builds a stronger classroom community.

4. Pass to Take a Break

Introduce a "pass to take a break" policy, allowing students to step out of the classroom when the content becomes overwhelming. They can take a walk, sit quietly, or speak with a counselor—whatever helps them regain composure without explaining why they need the break.

5. Engage Support Systems

Notify parents, guardians, and school counselors ahead of time when teaching sensitive content, like the Holocaust. Ensure that support systems outside the classroom are prepared to help students process the material.

- **Consider:** Provide resources and guidance to parents on how to have supportive conversations at home, especially during emotionally charged lessons. See here for an example from *Echoes & Reflections, Guidance for Families for Upper Elementary* –adaptable for all grade levels.

6. Movement to Process Emotions

Incorporate physical movement before and after difficult lessons. Walking or stretching can activate different parts of the nervous system, helping students release tension and return to class feeling more balanced.

7. Breathing and Silence

Before beginning a challenging lesson, take three deep breaths with your students. Afterward, sit in collective silence for 30 seconds, allowing the emotions to sit in the space. This practice acknowledges that feelings are natural and shouldn't be rushed through.

8. Use Music and Art

Allow students to draw or listen to music before and after challenging lessons. Both art and music can soothe emotional states and help students process feelings on a sensory level.

9. Focus on the Light in the Darkness

Echoes & Reflections offers clear, practical guidance on the importance of creating a curricular pathway for your students that shines a light on the humanity and resilience of the people at the center of the Holocaust. This should be a first read when preparing your curriculum and choosing the resources and historical events that will be integrated into your lesson plans. From the article:

The Holocaust illustrates the depths to which humanity can sink, but it also illustrates the heights to which we can soar. This is an important time to focus on human stories of “light in the darkness” instead of on the darkness alone. By changing your emphasis, focusing on life instead of death, students will encounter stories of human spirit that can inspire them, especially in these difficult times.

The Teacher's Role in Walking Safely In and Safely Out

It's important to remember that teachers, too, are human and carry their own emotional bubbles. When I watch a survivor's testimony, there are moments that move me deeply. I don't hold back those feelings. Instead, I share my emotional response with my students. By doing so, I model how to sit in emotion, take a breath, and respond mindfully.

We must prioritize our own well-being, too. After teaching an emotionally charged lesson, I encourage educators to take a walk, reflect, and practice self-care. As we guide our students through difficult content, we must walk safely in and safely out with them—because they need us to be present, grounded, and thoughtful in our approach.

Conclusion: The Heart of Safe Learning

The “Safely In, Safely Out” principle has become my guiding light in curriculum writing and

professional development. Without a supportive learning environment, our students' minds and bodies will be at dis-ease, unable to engage with the depth of the content. As educators, we owe it to our students—and ourselves—to walk through these lessons mindfully, supporting their emotional journeys every step of the way.

RESOURCES

Pedagogical Principles for Effective Holocaust Instruction (https://echoesandreflections.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Echoes-Pedagogy_Flyer.pdf)

Blog Post (<https://echoesandreflections.org/connect/?postname=lets-talk-about-the-boy-in-the-striped-pajamas&postid=943>)

Echoes & Reflections, Guidelines for Families for Upper Elementary (<https://echoesandreflections.org/upper-elementary/>)

Echoes & Reflections, Guidance for Bringing Students “Safely In and Safely Out” of Holocaust Learning (<https://echoesandreflections.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Guidance-for-Bringing-Students-Safely-in-and-Safely-out-of-Holocaust-Learning.pdf>)

ABOUT THE ESSAY AUTHOR

REBECCA KEEL works with organizations such as Echoes & Reflections, Education Design International, and Hold On to Your Music Foundation where she designs equity-driven curricula, leads professional development for educators, and facilitates training in social-emotional learning, inclusion, and storytelling.