

Sensitive subject matter appears throughout the curriculum in all subject matter because these topics are important for students to engage with. Teachers can support students in engaging with sensitive subject matter in responsive and age-appropriate ways. For teachers, the primary concern is the well-being of their students, and they must approach these subjects with care and compassion. Sensitive subject matter can deeply affect students, especially those with personal experiences or traumas related to these topics. It is important to acknowledge the potential emotional impact and prioritize students' mental well-being when addressing these subjects.

Supporting Students' Well-Being

Whenever possible when engaging with sensitive subject matter, it is preferred that teachers give students choices in their resource selection. The best way to do so is to have a central theme or inquiry question that can be explored through several different resources. Teachers can curate the resources and include a range of types and genres connected to the theme or inquiry. This way, a sensitive subject matter could be tackled from different perspectives or to different degrees, or a central inquiry or theme could be investigated using different resources, so that students can choose how to engage with subject matter. Students should not be asked to choose a text without knowing what it contains.

Sensitive subject matter can appear in all subjects and can include, but not limited, to racism and difficult history, Residential schools, climate change, immigration, suicide, disordered eating and body image, homophobia and transphobia, Holocaust education, gender-based violence, substance misuse, and domestic violence.

Preparing to Teach Sensitive Subject Matter

Before introducing sensitive subject matter in class, it is important for teachers to prepare themselves and their students by taking the following steps:

- **Review material related to the topic.** Teachers should review curricular outcomes to set the parameters for the learning experiences and the discussion. They should view or read all material that will be shared with students beforehand. Knowledge of the topic will help teachers anticipate their students' needs and what kind of supports should be provided.
- **Connect with reputable organizations or professionals in the field beforehand.** Teachers should prepare for class discussions by being aware of resources and knowing who to reach out to if they or their students have questions.
- **Inform comprehensive guidance teams, families/caregivers, and administrators.** Teachers should connect with their comprehensive guidance teams to let them know the topics that are going to be covered so that they can be prepared to support students if needed. They should reach out to families/caregivers in their communication plans to let them know what topics will be covered and make administrators aware of what is going to be discussed.
- **Create a safe learning environment.** Teachers should get to know their students and their communities so they can foster a classroom atmosphere where every student feels valued and respected. Co-create a classroom collective agreement that outlines expectations for you and your students so that discussions will be conducted respectfully.
- **Prepare students for the topic.** Students should be aware ahead of time that sensitive subject matter is going to be addressed. If a teacher knows of a student who may need support, they should take them aside and offer them a support person to sit with during discussions or make a plan to leave if they need to see a guidance counselor.

Teachers should be aware of regional policies around their duty to report in case students disclose personal information that may require reporting.

- **Prepare students for reactions.** Explain that people respond to sensitive subject matter in different ways. Some people feel anger, guilt, shame, sadness, laughing or defensiveness. Explain that behaviors such as joking are inappropriate and provide other ways for students to respond when uncomfortable.

While Teaching Sensitive Subject Matter

Teachers should consider taking the following approaches while teaching subject matter that may be emotionally difficult for some students:

- **Set ground rules for respectful dialogue.** Teachers should set clear expectations for how discussions should be conducted, and encourage students to actively listen to one another, avoid personal attacks, and focus on the topic at hand. Teachers should create an environment where disagreements are addressed immediately and respectfully, fostering a safe space for an open exchange of ideas.
- **Provide context and encourage critical thinking.** Teachers should provide context and background information related to the topic to help students understand the complexity of the issue. They should encourage students to question assumptions, evaluate sources, and form well-reasoned opinions. Asking open-ended questions to encourage students to think critically and engage in thoughtful discussions is an effective strategy.
- **Include a diversity of informed viewpoints.** Teachers should introduce multiple viewpoints on the topic to expose students to a range of ideas. This approach encourages them to consider various angles, promoting a deeper understanding of the subject and challenging them to think beyond their initial perspectives.
- **Exercise caution when discussing details.** Teachers should avoid using resources that offer too much detail about, or graphic depictions of, sensitive subject matter. The focus of the teaching should emphasize resilience in the face of difficulty, or treatment and support to foster healing.
- **Avoid oversimplification of the topic.** It is important to present the complexity of the circumstances surrounding many sensitive topics. Teachers should correct misconceptions and challenge harmful stereotypes that perpetuate things like gender-based violence, suicide, racism, sexism, homophobia/transphobia, substance misuse, disordered eating, abuse, and neglect.
- **Use the right language.** Teachers should ensure that the language used in classroom discussion avoids making assumptions or judgments about a person's experiences. The discussion should focus on their strengths and capabilities. Language should avoid re-traumatization, respect students' boundaries, and acknowledge their strengths. Labels or stigmatizing terms related to mental health or trauma should not be used. Instead, teachers and students should use person-first language that emphasizes the individual, not their experiences. Language that makes light of serious issues can be hurtful, for example, terms like "crazy" or "insane." "Mental illness" should be used instead of "mental breakdown."
- **Witness trauma.** If a student shares their experiences with sensitive topics in class, teachers should listen attentively, show empathy and support, and allow the student to express their feelings openly. Later, check in with the student after class to see if they require additional support.

Teachers should be aware of their own positionality and be mindful of expressing their own opinions. Positionality refers to how an individual's social cultural, and personal background influences their perspectives and understanding of the world. Discussions should be responsive to curricular outcomes.

Comparing one person's trauma to another's can belittle their experiences. Avoid statements like "Others have had it worst."

- **Encourage reflection.** Teachers can assign reflective exercises or writing prompts to help students process their emotions and thoughts after engaging with the subject matter. Encouraging self-reflection promotes emotional growth and understanding.

The Importance of Teaching Sensitive Subject Matter

Teaching sensitive subject matter is a crucial aspect of our collective responsibility as educators to our students and society as a whole. By addressing complex societal issues in the classroom, we foster a deeper understanding of the world, encourage critical thinking, and promote empathy among students. These discussions can help build a more inclusive and equitable society, making them not only important but also transformative.

Teachers need to be mindful of their own reactions to discussions of sensitive subject matter and practise self-care. Teachers want to help their students when they know they have experienced traumatic events, but students are best supported by those trained to deal with children and youth dealing with adverse childhood experiences.