# Crafting a Safe Ethical Space in the Social Work Classroom

**by**

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Master of Social Work, University of British Columbia, 2005

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## Abstract

North American educational institutions remain dominated by a worldview that stems from the Western colonization process. Given the increasing diversity of students, this failure to recognize and appreciate different worldviews has left some students feeling discomforted and silenced. In order to craft an ethical and safe social work classroom in which these students can demonstrate their whole (authentic) self, university instructors must take steps to transform and decolonize education. This qualitative research study by an experienced social work instructor at Thompson Rivers University (TRU) in British Columbia, Canada, adopts a tripartite methodology (including autoethnography, narrative inquiry, and practitioner inquiry), to gain insight into the experiences of social work students and craft an ethical and safe learning environment. This research study was broken into four phases: engaging in dialogue with members of the Kamloops Gurudwara Sangat; engaging in dialogue with TRU social work students; applying teachings from these interviews to the social work classroom; and, interviewing social work students about their experience of the social work classroom. Results of this study indicate that there is potential to craft safe, ethical spaces but it is dependent on a variety of factors. These factors fall into three categories: (1) classroom characteristics, (2) student characteristics, and (3) professor characteristics. Effective inclusive social work pedagogy should take all of these factors into account.



**Keywords**: racialization; colonization; safe space; ethical space; sangat; social work education

## Dedication

I dedicated this to my Manji, Sama Kaur Chahal and all my ancestors who sacrificed so much for the opportunities we have today.

## Acknowledgements

First and Foremost, I am grateful to Waheguru who has provided for me and given me the strength of faith. I am sincerely appreciative of, and grateful to, the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc people who, for thousands of years, nurtured and cultivated the land that my parents immigrated to.

I am forever thankful for my mom, Mohinder Kaur Chahal, and dad, Avtar Singh Chahal for always being in our corner. My parents have been an unending well of love and support. Who I am today is reflective of their virtue, strength, and courage. My mother's love and kindness was not limited to my siblings and I; rather, she has touched the lives of our extended family and community. Through her grace, I have learned what it means to be humble, kind, and selfless. Her life has been dedicated to her family. My mother has worked hard to provide us opportunities she did not have. Her dedication has nurtured my heart and soul. Through my father, I learned strength and resilience. He taught me to always try my best for myself and my family. My father believed that we can do great things; his belief in us has given us the self-esteem and confidence to reach towards the stars. My father never had this opportunity but he was resolute to ensure that we did. I will continue to reach for the stars! I am so happy that they have been a part of my journey.

My daughter Tamah, husband Jonathan, and furbaby Peppa are the loves of my life. Tamah is the kindest and most loving person I have known. I am so thankful for the opportunity to be her mother. She has provided me love and support as I laboured throughout this journey. She waited patiently for me when I had classes in Vancouver and accompanied me on retreats to Haida Gwaii, Terrace, and Sechelt. Tamah inspires me to do better. One day, she will inspire the world!

Truly, my husband is the reason why I was able to complete this dissertation. Since starting this journey, he has sacrificed his dreams so that I could complete my work and achieve mine. He cared for and entertained Tamah while I attended class, ensuring that I was always with the support of my family. He encouraged me to keep going when I felt discouraged. Most importantly, he spent countless hours editing my work. Without the support of my husband, I would not have finished my dissertation.

Throughout my life, my siblings, Jeevyn Kaur Chahal and Hardeep Singh Chahal, have been my best friends and biggest supporters. My life journey would not be the same without them. Their love elevates me; I deeply admire their commitment and drive which has culminated in brilliance in their own lives and careers. Through my siblings and Jonathan, I have inherited some of my favourite people: my sister-in-laws, Aman and Synthia, and my brother-in-laws, Evan and Stephen. My amazing nieces and nephews Hridik, Eva, Jazmyn and Leo.

I would like to acknowledge my mentors, colleagues, and friends who elevated me and inspired my learning. My work family at Parkview Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services were my cheerleaders. Dr. Hosenbocus had provided many years of mentorship helping me develop my skills. My academic friends and colleagues encouraged, and believed in, me as I completed my dissertation. My BIPOC friends and colleagues were always accessible to me. The provided me with support and a place to debrief. Finally, my sisters in this SFU doctorate program inspired, and encouraged, me as I walked this path. My learning journey would not be the same without them.

Finally, I want to thank my supervisor, Mark Fettes. He has proven himself to be patient, kind, gentle, and wise throughout my journey. Mark's understanding and support kept me going to the end. I will be forever grateful for his mentorship and willingness to craft a safe and ethical space for me. I am also thankful for my supervisory committee's patience and kindness. They provided me with encouragement and kindness and have made me feel worthy of this journey.

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## Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| Baba | Used to show respect towards a senior man in Punjabi |
| Bibi | Used to show respect towards a senior woman in Punjabi |
| Chunni | Piece of cloth (scarf) worn as a head covering |
| Gurudwara | Place of worship of Sikhs |
| Guthaaa | Hairstyle of two braids |
| Kameez | Long Indian shirt/tunic |
| Kirtan | Sanskrit word for telling a story usually in the form of song in Sikh religion |
| Panji | Sister in Punjabi |
| Rumal | Piece of cloth worn as a head covering |
| Salwar | Indian loose pants that are wide at top and loose at the bottom |
| Seva | Selfless service that is performed without any expectations of result or reward for performing it |

# 1 Introduction

I was born and raised on the traditional territories of Tk'emlups te Secwepemc in Kamloops, British Columbia (BC), where I am now an Assistant Professor at Thompson Rivers University (TRU) and Professional Practice Lead (Mental Health) for the Interior Health Authority. This thesis explores a dimension of my educational practice that is of great importance to me: that is, learning to craft and facilitate safe space in the social work classroom. The experience of cultural safety[1] was often lacking in my family history and personal experience. After immigrating to Kamloops from Punjab, India, my parents experienced racism (in several forms) on a daily basis; they were not often afforded a safe space. As a second generation, racialized woman, my education and vocational journey has been plagued by experiences of racism. As I have matured and become more established in my career, I have tried to craft safe spaces for others; this research is a way of connecting my teaching practice on a deeper level with my cultural identity and my values as an educator.

This research utilizes autoethnography, narrative inquiry and practitioner inquiry as methodologies. Essential to such an approach is that the reader know the researcher, the journey which led to the research question, and the research question itself. This chapter will lay the foundation for the rest of the dissertation.

[1] Williams (1999) defines cultural safety as an environment that is spiritually, socially and emotionally safe, as well as physically safe for people; where there is no assault on, challenge to or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and the experience of learning together (p.213).

## 1.1 My Journey to This Research

*My first thoughts of pursuing a doctorate degree occurred after completion of the Master of Social Work program in 2005. My first social work mentor, Bill Simon, was the director of Secwepemc Child and Family Services (SCFS). Bill was a proud Mi'kmaq man who spent a great deal of time teaching through storytelling. After spending many hours discussing our worldviews, we agreed that our perspectives would not be found in the university, workplace, or society. These talks ignited in me a desire to pursue a doctoral journey; however, I chose not to pursue this path at this time as I was aware of my naivety. I still had much to learn and experience. Though thankful for, and appreciative of, Bill's mentoring, I found myself being drawn towards new opportunities. These opportunities would be found in the field of mental health.*

*Upon leaving the SCFS to realize these new opportunities, Bill and the staff gifted me with a pine needle basket within which nestled a braid of sweetgrass and a single pine cone. Bill told me that the sweetgrass was a reminder that different knowledges are woven together and the pine cone signified hope that my career would always remain full. He did not specify whether this was his teaching or a teaching from the maker of the basket, but I understood it to be part of the gitt. Although Bill passed*

*away before I started my doctoral journey, this teaching remains with me, embodied in his gift, and I cherish it to this day.*

As a racialized woman and social worker, I have been exposed to numerous barriers and oppressions that many people in Canadian society face. I first started to individualize these oppressions as a young adult. As I got older, I realized that these adversities could not be overcome by any one person. Trying to overcome these adversities alone is fruitless as the 'impetus' for change is not an individual characteristic or flaw that one can improve upon. Many times, I wished that I was White; however, as I matured, this wishing was replaced with feelings of frustration and anger. As I entered the field of social work, I came to understand how these adversities are created structurally. Now, I recognize structural reform as a central focus of social work (Mullaly & Dupre, 2018). Prompted by a call to engage in the broader struggle for social justice and equality, I completed a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree, Master Degree in Social Work (MSW), and became an Assistant Professor in the Social Work department at TRU.

As my formative academic years involved immersion in the physical sciences, I found the courses on social work topics, such as anti-oppressive practice, to be interesting and refreshing. Despite enjoying these new concepts, I experienced a sense of 'otherness'. I believe these feelings stemmed from the literature, theories, and policies I was exposed to being written predominantly by Western scholars who spoke through a Euro-Western lens. Moreover, there was a lack of diversity in the social work program. For example, other than a course which explored First Nations people, classes such as 'Race, Racialization, and Immigration' and 'Decolonizing Social Work Practice' did not exist in the program. As a racialized person, I felt confused and displaced listening to White scholars explain racism and the experience of racialized people, especially as discussions about oppression were often interrupted by microaggressions[2] or racist comments. As I continued my education by enrolling in a Master of Social Work program, I was disheartened to find that, despite the material

[2] Microagressions refers intentional or unintentional insults or slights that minority groups face from the dominant culture. These slights can be verbal, behavioural or environmental (Hays, 2016).

becoming more critical and intense, it continued to be presented exclusively from a Euro-Western frame of reference.

My first teaching appointment was in 2004. This is when I was first hired by the University College of the Cariboo [now known as TRU (TRU)] as a sessional instructor. One year after this appointment, I was promoted to Clinical Team Leader (clinical educator) for a child and adolescent mental health program. The responsibilities associated with these promotions meant that I was faced with a steep learning curve, which I traversed through further education and reflection. I am grateful for these early years, as the insights I gained during this time formed the foundation of my pedagogical philosophy. Recently, I was privileged with the opportunity to become an assistant teaching professor. This role has entailed spending more time in the classroom. With increasing classroom exposure, I have come to better appreciate the experiences of students and professors. Additionally, my change in role from a Clinical Team Leader to a Professional Practice Lead (for Mental Health Social Workers) has furthered my understanding of the unique challenges of social work practice.

Since receiving my BSW, I have dedicated many hours to reading the latest research in student engagement and pedagogy in order to improve my teaching practice. What I have read has solidified an understanding of the intricacies and complexities of being an educator. Of utmost concern to me, despite growing diversity of content, is that social work students continue to discuss the same issues which caused me discomfort during my own studies. As an educator, I find myself empathizing with Indigenous and racialized students when micro-aggressions or outright racist comments are voiced in class. Moreover, these students of diverse backgrounds continue to stay silent as classroom discussions remain dominated by a Western worldview. Thus, I find the gift of being an educator to be bittersweet, as the same racial inequalities which I faced continue to exist within the social work classroom. With this realization, I believe it is imperative that an 'ethical safe space' be created so that racialized and indigenous students, who are often found sitting at the back of the classroom, are given the opportunity to feel safe and have their thoughts and feelings valued.

To better gauge the current educational climate for racialized and Indigenous students, I decided to find out more about the experiences and perceptions of the

students in the TRU BSW program. Specifically, I wondered what students believed to be needed in order to craft an ethical and safe space? In addition to engaging with BSW students, I wanted to draw on my own connection with the Kamloops Guru Sahib Gurudwara Sangat by engaging with Sangat members to gain an understanding of how they experience safe ethical space. As both a student and professor, I hoped that the insights I gained would help me, and possibly others, to create an ethical and safe space in the social work classroom.

## 1.2 Locating Myself as Researcher

*As a child, my mom taught me important life lessons which I appreciate to this day. Because my mother worked two jobs at a time, we would see her only briefly when she was going from one job to another. Therefore, my Manji (grandmother) became the primary caregiver and took great pride in caring for me and my siblings. My Manji was very diligent in braiding my hair. She would always braid my hair in two traditional guthaa. Although I look back on this with fondness, I also remember her braiding my hair so tight that I would have a headache throughout the day.*

*When my mom did have time off from work, she would devote herself to taking care of us. I cherish the moments that I had with my mom as they were few and far between due to her hectic lifestyle. My mom would braid my hair when she was home, which I especially liked because she was so gentle. I remember watching her doing it. Sometimes, when one of the strands was thinner than the other two, I noticed that my mom did not unravel my braid, as I would have expected. When I asked her why, she*

*said, "You can't always unravel all of the hair; you can just take some from the thicker strand and add it to the thinner strand."*

*I am now the proud mother of a wonderful daughter, Tamah. The time I get to spend with my daughter is just as special as the time my mom got to spend with me. One morning, I was getting Tamah (who was four years old at the time) ready for school. While braiding her hair, one strand got thinner. I automatically took some hair from another strand to make sure that they were all the same size. Tamah was watching, and she stopped me when she saw me take hair from another strand. "Mommy, what are you doing?" she asked. "You have to start again." I told her that you cannot always start again; sometimes you have to take from another strand to make it okay.*

*As I engage in this research, I find relevance in this life lesson that my mother taught me. My time in the field of education has exposed me to three different strands: the Euro-Western worldview, the Eastern worldview, and the Indigenous worldview. Optimally, these three strands would stand in balance. However, as my education has been through North American universities, one of these strands has always stood dominant. As a racialized woman, the dominance of the Euro-Western perspective has been troubling for me. This dominance has, at best, acted to minimize and silence my racialized worldview. Thus, as I have grown and matured as an individual and as an educator, I now strive to find balance between these strands.*

My social location is integrally related to my research. I identify as a Sikh Punjabi woman (second generation immigrant settler) who continues to be racialized by modern Western society. I live on the traditional lands of the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc within the Secwepemcul'ecw and stolen territory of the Secwepemc. The intersectionalities of my identities play a key role in my understanding of ethical and safe space. Although I rely on my past experience as a student to understand the subject or race and racialization, I continue to experience racialization as an instructor. Therefore, my appreciation of ethical and safe space is multi-layered.

The experience of being a racialized women has been a challenge throughout my life. Living in Kamloops, I, along with my family, have experienced both overt and covert racism. Defined by Dalal (2002), overt racism constitutes a blatant expression of

discrimination against minorities while covert racism is a subtler form of racial discrimination. As a young adult, I fell victim to many experiences of overt racism in the community and education settings. As I aged, the racism became more covert. Throughout my career, microaggressions and covert racism have had a significant impact on work experience and job opportunities. I have often found myself without the shelter of safe space. As an example, during my time teaching at TRU (for the past 19 years), I have had to work harder than my White colleagues for recognition and advancement opportunities.

When I first started teaching at TRU, my focus was on learning how to be an effective teacher. When I experienced microaggressions from students, I attributed it to my inexperience as an instructor. Over time, I came to internalize [3]the racism. Not until later, and after having gained much experience, did I recognize the microaggressions I was facing. I did not have the privilege of having racialized colleagues to share such experiences with; as such, I was hesitant to express my concerns. I also witnessed the microaggressions that Indigenous professors faces and absence of support they received. This silenced me further.

I recall a situation in which a student was not happy with the grade that they were getting. The student came to my office during my office hours to discuss their mark. At this time, I was a sessional instructor with a shared office. On this day, two other sessional instructors (from different programs) were present in the office. I explained the reason why I gave this particular grade, and informed the student of the steps to be taken if they were not happy with it. However, before I could finish, the student started to yell at me and treat me as if I was inferior. The student claimed that the other professors gave him straight A's and insinuated that I was not at their level. I outlined the steps to be taken in order to submit a complaint. After the student left, I was visibly shaken. The other sessional instructors advised me that such aggressive behavior should not be tolerated from a student and I should advise the program coordinator/chair. I heeded this advice, and the student was talked to about their aggressive behavior; however, we never discussed the White privilege of the student and his racist behavior towards me. I continued to teach this student. He never

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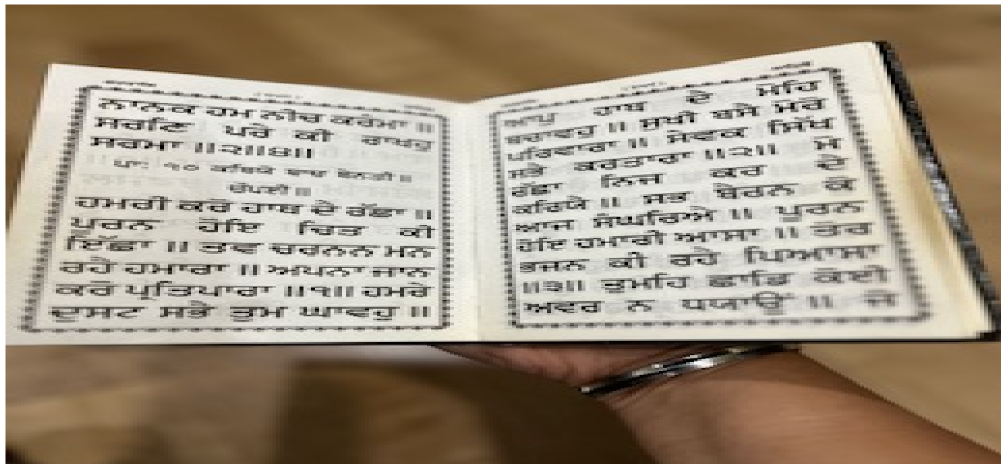
[3] Internalized racism is the process of internalizing the stereotypes and racist judgements of the dominant culture towards the minority culture to which one belongs (Nicolaides, Eschenbacher, Buergelt, Gilpin-Jackson, Welch & Misawa, 2022).

apologized for his behavior and his face wore a look of condescension for the rest of the semester. I did not feel confident enough to discuss with him the racism I felt was expressed by his actions.

While teaching to a predominantly non-racialized class, I have, on more than one occasion, found myself holding back while being challenged by a non-racialized student. More distressing is that after being challenged, I could not always find support from colleagues. I believe a significant factor is the lack of racialized or indigenous professors with similar lived experience—although I realize that such lived experiences are likely to be diverse and unique. Moreover, I am aware that others' subjective experience of the social work classroom may not conform to my expectations due to differences in intersectionality.

## 1.3 Sikh Woman Identity



Rajvinder Kaur Chahal is my given Sikh name. My name was the start of my path to spirituality. The word 'Sikh' (meaning 'learner') refers to a follower of the Sikh religion. Upon the birth of Guru Nanak in 1469, the Sikh religion was born. The birth of Sikhism, in some way, can be perceived as a reform movement, one of whose chief aims was to cleanse the Indian landscape of unjust and unhealthy social behaviors (especially in Punjab where most of the Sikh Gurus lived). According to the teachings in the Guru Granth Sahib, "regardless of culture, caste, race, or gender, a Sikh should follow the teachings promulgated in the Guru Granth Sahib (hereafter GGS) and make

a sincere effort to live according to the principles outlined in the Sikh Reht Maryada (Code of Sikh Conduct and Conventions)" (Sandhu, 2009, p. 24).

When a baby is born, Sikh parents turn to the scripture of the Guru Granth Sahib (GGS) to determine the first letter of the baby's name. The GGS (our holy scripture) contains the teachings of our ten gurus, as well as other prominent spiritual leaders. This tradition entails opening the Guru Granth Sahib to a random page from which a Hukam (verse) is read. The first Gurmukhi letter of the Hukam determines the first letter of the name that is chosen. In keeping with this tradition, the first letter of my name, Rajvinder, was determined by the GGS (Khalsa, 2020b). The middle name of Sikh women is Kaur which means 'princess.' For Sikh men, the middle name is Singh, which means 'lion.' My parents taught us that Sikh names are rich in meaning. However, it took me a while to understand the value of my name.

*I sat with arms crossed on the stairs inside of our family house. I was probably twelve years old at the time. I was disgruntled as I sat stewing in my displeasure and resentment. My siblings and I were talking about the meanings of our names. In my mind, my siblings' names held great meaning… mine did not. My dad found me sitting in my discontent. "What's wrong?" my dad asked. "Jeevyn and Hardeep's name have good meanings but mine doesn't mean anything," I said to him. My dad noticed my frustration. With surprise, he replied, "What do you mean?" "Well, Hardeep's name means 'light of god' and Sukhjiwan's name means 'happy life'. My name doesn't mean anything."*

*With a big smile, my dad said, "Your name is very important and has great meaning!" My dad explained that 'Rajvinder' means 'king of the Vinders.' He went on to explain that the Vinders were a small group of people in India. At one point in time, an army was going to invade their community. My father told me that the leader of the Vinders inspired his people to believe in themselves and fight against the invading army. Although fewer in number, the leader told his people that with his leadership, they would be able to defeat the invading army.*

*The story inspired me and lifted my spirits. I believe that the story, which stuck with me throughout my life, has helped in shaping who I have become.*

This story is fundamental to my location. I am, foremost, a Sikh woman whose identity is defined by my Sikh spirituality. My values, ethics, and way of being are linked to my Sikh spirituality. By my becoming a leader in my workplace, home, and social circles, my given name Rajvinder (meaning ruler) has been fulfilled. For Sikh people, the genders are recognized as equal. By refusing to accept the limits of the socio-economic glass ceiling, I have expressed the Sikh tenet of gender equality in my own life.

Our dad taught us how to read scripture from the GGS. As a family, reciting our gurus' teachings became a daily family protocol. Every day before dinner, we would gather as a family. We would sit on the floor and cover our heads with a chuni/ramal to read our prayers together. This was one of my first experiences of Sangat. My dad would usually read the prayers if he was home. My mom would read the prayers if my dad was at work. Eventually, as we learned to read the prayers, we took turns as well. This spiritual practice of the Sangat became the foundation of a safe space for me.

## 1.4 Punjabi Women Identity

"The word 'Punjabi' refers to the Indigenous peoples of the Punjab as well as their respective languages, beliefs, practices, and cultural patterns which date back to the Indus civilization" (Grewal, 1994, cited in Sandhu, 2009, p. 24). My family history can be traced to Punjab (which means 'land of five waters') in NorthWestern India. My father, Avtar Chahal, was born in Janpur, Punjab and my mother, Mohinder Chahal,

was born in Langari, Punjab. My parents, as well as their extended families, resided within these communities. In keeping with Punjabi tradition and worldview, my parents viewed their community members as brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and so forth. My parents, who wed each other in their early twenties, have fond memories of living in a collective community in which people worked together to help each other survive. Both my Baba (paternal grandfather) and Manji (paternal grandmother) were born in Punjab, India. In order to provide for his family, my Baba worked as a mason in Nairobi, Kenya. He would send money to my Manji in India where she raised their five children.

This family history is significant for a number of reasons. One is that after my Baba immigrated to Kenya, my parents followed. A second is that my Manji (maternal grandmother) was a great influence in my development. Because my Manji was left to raise the children, as well as manage the home and land, she became a very strong and independent woman. In our village, my Manji was very well known. She was respected for her strength, independence, and assertiveness. Between the time of my sisters' birth and my birth, my Manji immigrated to Kamloops, where in keeping with Punjabi tradition she would be our parent and teacher. Through my Manji's caregiving and teachings, my sisters and I also became strong, independent women. Punjabi became our first language as my Manji did not speak English. While my Manji taught us to speak Punjabi, it was my father who taught us to read and write in Punjabi. As I look back, my grandmother's teachings were implicit in her way of being.

From the time of our birth, my siblings and I have been recognized as part of the Kamloops Indo-Canadian community. This Indo-Canadian culture was a source of resilience for my siblings and I as we grew up. As a family, we attended the Gurudwara on a regular basis. "Gurudwaras are the Sikhs' principal religious institutions. As places of worship, they are the foundations community-building and acting as guardians of its core values" (Singh, G., 2006, p147). The Gurudwara provides our community with a forum for collective worship by the Sangat (congregation) (Singh, G., 2006). Every life situation is celebrated, understood, grieved, or acknowledged within the Sangat at the Gurudwara. For example, after my birth I was taken to the Gurudwara prior to being brought home and I also took my daughter to the Gurudwara after her birth. All of our family milestones were first acknowledged at the Gurudwara: childbirth, birthdays, school successes, graduations, new jobs, and getting our driver's license. The Sangat became my "safe space" to learn and grow through life. Not only did I learn about

spirituality, the Sangat instilled in me an understanding of equality, seva, and humanity. This learning came easily for me as I felt safe and accepted in the Sangat.

## 1.5 Second Generation Immigrant Identity and Racialized Identity

In 1964, my father, who was in his early twenties, left Punjab to work with my Baba in Kenya. Later, my mother joined my father in Kenya where they resided for many years. This was my parents' first experience of being immigrants. Unfortunately, my Baba died while in Kenya, when he was in his early 40's. I never had the opportunity to meet him.

My parents immigrated to Canada in the late 1960s. At that time, Canada was in the process of embracing a multicultural ideology. This had not always been the case. Earlier, Canada favoured immigrants from Europe and strongly discouraged coloured immigrants. For example, in 1915 Immigration Minister W.D. Scott argued, "it seems to me tha*t* Canada would be adopting a very short-sighted policy to encourage the immigration of colored people of any class or occupation" (Calliste, 1994, p.133). As immigration from Western Europe and Eastern Europe declined, Canada started to look at applicants from less favoured countries considered. In fact, not until the 1960s were immigrants from other countries, including India, allowed (Li, 2000). The biggest motivator for allowing immigrants from all over the world was the fulfillment of Canada's economic needs. In 1967, Canada adopted the Universal Point System which allowed immigrants to come to Canada based on the skills they possessed and not their country of origin or race (Li, 2000, p. 5). Although the point system still holds many biases for racialized immigrants, my parents were able to immigrate to Canada. My father, being a radio and television engineer, was granted enough points to qualify based on the point system.

Like all immigrants coming to Canada at that time, my parents were unaware of Indigenous title to the land; specifically, that Kamloops was the stolen territory of the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc (Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc, 2016). "The word Kamloops is the English translation of the Shuswap word Tk'emlúps, meaning 'where the rivers meet,' and for centuries has been the home of the Tk'emlupsemc, 'people of the confluence" (Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc, 2016). Cultural, ecological, and historical

knowledge is manifest within the Secwepemculecw. Such knowledge includes values, beliefs, rituals, songs, stories, social and political structures, and spirituality of the people. "The Secwepemc economic system consisted of hunting, fishing, and trapping for food sources and other material needs" (Billy, 2009, p. 43). The Secwepemc people viewed all aspects of knowledge (including language) as vitally linked to their land. Secwepemc knowledge, which contained the teachings needed for the maintenance of Secwepemc culture and identity, was passed down to next generations through oral traditions (TK'emlups te Secwepemc, 2016). As she recounts, however:

> This way of life… was transformed drastically with the arrival of the European colonizers. Waves of colonizing forces confronted the Secwepemc. The colonial government agents, explorers, fur traders, miners, missionaries, ranchers, loggers, and settlers wrought destruction on the once strong and healthy Secwepemc Nation. Although the colonial forces were many, the colonial governments and the churches are considered the main perpetrators, working together in a systematic, synchronized way to colonize and oppress our people (Billy, 2009, p. 7).

Billy (2009) adds, "through these acts, Indigenous People endured the loss of their children, language, and land" (p. 7). Perhaps most devastating, Billy (2009) continues, was the Indian Act of 1876 which introduced further legislation to legitimize the colonization[4] of the Secwepemc Peoples. Colonization transformed the cultural landscape from one that Europeans perceived as archaic and savage to one which they believed to be modern and civilized. Evidence of this belief in European superiority can be found in many documents of the period, including those defining the province's policy for Indian education (Haig-Brown, 1988, p. 29).

My parents came to Kamloops as immigrants in 1967. Like other new immigrants, they were not aware, nor were they given insight, into the lives of the Secwepemc people nor the genocide that was occurring. Therefore, they learned the ways of colonized "Canadian life." They were not aware of the traumas being inflicted by residential schools, nor were they aware that they could become part of the colonization process which continued to take place in Canada.

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[4] In Canada, colonization refers to the "taking control of lands, resources, language, cultures and relationships of the Indigenous peoples. While decolonization refers to the removing or undoing of colonial elements" (Queen's University, 2023).

According to Randy Fred (in Haig-Brown, 1988, p.15):

> colonizers utilize two forms of genocide: intentional and unintentional. The intentional forms include residential schools, land grabbing, and downright murder. Unintentional genocide includes the introduction of disease (although in some cases this was intentional), which reduced the population of the original inhabitants of the Americas more than the intentional forms of genocide.

One tool of genocide which continues to stand in Kamloops, the city where I live, is the Kamloops Indian Residential School (KIRS). In this school, many Secwepemc children endured physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual abuse. The KIRS opened in 1890 and did not close until 1978. My parents, oblivious to the occurrence of genocide, immigrated to Kamloops before the closing of the KIRS. Upon arrival, my mother was asked to learn English while the Indigenous language of the land was oppressed and rendered invisible.

Like other new immigrants, my parents were forced to adapt quickly to a new culture, language, and system of laws. I remember looking at pictures of my parents when they first arrived in Canada. I wondered why my mother no longer wore the dresses she did as a new immigrant. My mother stated that she had to adopt a Western style of dress to fit into Canadian culture. If she continued to wear her traditional clothes, she would face racism when in public. Though followers of the Sikh religion are encouraged to wear their hair long, my dad was forced to cut his hair short to get a job at the local pulp mill. These are just two of the many examples of racism my parents faced in Canada. Upon their arrival in Canada, what was once overt became covert (which is often harder to identity). Although many Canadians would argue that "we are less racist today", a great number of Canada's racialized people would argue that "although overt racism may be on a decline, covert racism has a strong foothold in many of society's' policies and structures" (Dalal, 2002). "The literature on racism in Canada has observed and drawn attention to a new form of racism, which is covert or disguised" (Nkrumah, 2021, p. 364). This transformation of racism is not unique to Canada. Chin calls on us to "witness the arc of racism in America as it evolves from overt to covert manifestation even as it remains a permanent feature of the American landscape" (2015, p. 1).

## 1.6 Unsafe Space in Education

> To be hated, despised, and threatened by other humans is the ultimate fear of all human beings (Battiste, 2013, p.137).

*When my siblings and I were in Elementary school, there was only one other individual who shared our ethnicity; a girl. We were met with racism on a regular basis. Although mostly covert, at times, the racism could be very overt. Our strategy to circumvent this racism was to immerse ourselves in the Western way, thus becoming still further subjected to its hegemony.*

*Nonetheless, it was very evident that we were different. Throughout our elementary school days, my siblings and I stuck together. My sister was the oldest, I was the middle child, and my brother the youngest. My sister was in charge of walking us home from school. One day, my sister was not able to pick my brother up from Kindergarten class, so it was my duty to accompany him home. School was finally over for the day. "Thank God," I thought to myself. I felt very uneasy at school as it was diametrically opposite to my home life. "Oh well!" I use to tell myself, "this is what my parents want for us—new opportunities!" I walked over to the kindergarten in order to pick up my younger brother. As I approached the stairs, I discovered that a bully, fairly big in size, was towering over my brother. The bully was ridiculing my brother's long hair which was secured in a traditional ghutee. "Now I got you where I want you!" he snarled. My poor little brother was slumped over in the corner, looking frightened. Suddenly, a wave of anger came over me; I was sick of people treating us badly because of who we were. I brought my arm back, and then, with force, hit the kid with my school bag. "SMACK!" The bully, with a stunned look, turned to face me. I looked at him with determination and resolve. He ran down the stairs and took off without looking back. I looked down at my brother, he looked at me with relief and said, "You saved my life!"*

As a child, I attempted to skip kindergarten by feigning a stomach ache. After a month had elapsed, my parents took me to see our family doctor. The doctor advised my parents that I did not have any problems with my stomach. This was not news to me as I had been actively trying to avoid school. My parents were disappointed that I had been lying. However, this led me to achieve perfect attendance for the remainder of my school years. Although I continued to pray for some kind of disruption which

would allow me to miss school, I would go to school even when sick. I remember telling myself that I would quickly complete grade 12 and never return to the education system.

Academic success came easy to me as I genuinely enjoyed learning. Nonetheless, I found the school environment to be a source of stress. Looking back, I realize that my dislike of the education system was due to experiences of racism and lack of safe space. I have come to realize that my education catered to a colonial Euro-Western worldview, as well as being fraught with overt and covert racism. As four racialized students among a cohort of middle-class Anglo-Saxon elementary students, our worldviews were not recognized. Upon transitioning to high school, there were more racialized individuals among the student body. Although this made us feel less alone, it did not necessarily make the space more inclusive. Many of the racialized students were subjected to acts of both overt and covert racism. I recall one student being called a "curry muncher" by other, non-racialized, students. The student, unable to take the continued racism, went to talk to the principal. The school sent a notice to the parents of all the racialized students asking if their children had been victim of racism. Although I was, indeed, subject to racism, I did not say anything as I was concerned that I would be othered and would make my parents worry.

Despite this student spotlighting the racism which racialized students experienced on a daily basis, covert racism was embedded within the structure of the school itself. The curriculum which we learned was based on Western ideology; other worldviews were presented as being inferior. On example, in our social studies class, we learned about the Oka Crisis. The teacher presented the Indigenous protestors as villains in the crisis. Military action to extinguish the protests was seen as favourable. I never really understood the crisis until much later.

Despite many years having passed since my days in school, many students continue to feel unsafe within an education that prevents them from being their authentic selves. Ermine speaks of "Western universality" which has become synonymous with a "singular world consciousness: a mono-culture with a claim to one model of humanity and one model of society" (2007, p. 198). As a result of this dogma, "minority populations such as Indigenous peoples, women, the aged, and the handicapped are imaginatively created for a caged existence and remain invisible and

powerless when compared to the mythical norms established in the Western society" (Ermine, 2007, p.199). While in grade school, I was led to believe that the Western view was a "singular world consciousness".

I was fortunate to have strong teachers at home. By engaging in dialogue with my cultural teachers (my parents) and community members, I was able to start on a path towards development and integration of my true self. In contrast to the notion that a strong self was founded through the establishment of independence, self-sufficiency, and self-pride (the Western ideal which I had been taught at school), my parents taught me that identity was built upon being a part of a continuum of family, community and Waheguru (god). My worth was tied to the self-sacrifices and contributions that I made to my family, community and humanity. Through my parents, I learned that all people have their own truths and that our truths may not always align with the dominant truths of society at large. However, due to my heritage not being acknowledged at school, I found it increasingly difficult to integrate my culture at home with the Euro-Western culture dominant at school. It is apparent that many other students from non-Western backgrounds have had similar experiences.

> I was raised in my grandmother's household, which included my mother and aunts and uncles. I spent much of my time in my early years with my grandmother. My grandmother's frame of reference and values are deeply rooted in traditional Pueblo life (Cajete, 2015, p.2).

"Most of my life," according to one decolonial scholar (Shahjahan, 2005), "has been a tapestry of interactions with different bodies, worldviews, languages, ethnicities, and religions. This has impacted my views on knowledge production." Shahjahan adds, "I have a hard time listening when people claim that they have the 'truth' and that what they know is universal" (2005, p. 216). For Shahjahan, the Western tendency towards claims of universality can block the recognition of others' lived truths. Reflecting this disconnect, Villanueva (2013) states, "not surprisingly, the only educational spaces that have validated my life, las luchas de mi familia, and that of my ancestors are the courses that I have taken in Mexican-American and Chicana/o studies respectively" (p. 27). Sadly, my educational journey is an expression of these comments. Due to the predominance of Western ideology in the mainstream education environment, I found myself unable to express the totality of the self until my doctoral studies.

**Racism and Colonialism in the Education System**

"The key in designing meaningful education in Canada must begin with confronting the hidden standards of racism, colonialism, and cultural and linguistic imperialism in the modern curriculum and see the theoretical incoherence with the modern theory of society" (Battiste, 2013, p. 29). It is important to consider that current educational spaces continue to be contested spaces which have been built on the premise of colonization and the White gaze. The settler education of past and present has been based on the Eurocentric worldview and ethics. This in turn has made it difficult for students with other worldviews to be their whole selves in the classroom. In her book, *The anti-racist writing workshop: How to decolonize the creative classroom*, Felicia Chavez (2021) starts by giving an example of the difficulty for people of colour to be their whole selves in a university setting. Her example is situated in the context of a writing course.

> Thus the implicit imperative for people of color in MFA programs: to write, but not to exercise voice. Because if we spoke up (if we spoke up!) the Great and Terrible Oz would reveal itself as a sickly White monolith, teaching on tradition in an effort to sustain its self-important power. Still we were the chosen few, lucky to be there. We were not about to mess it up by complaining, except maybe to one another behind locked doors (Chavez, 2021, p. 12).

This sentiment is felt by many Indigenous and people of colour in the classroom setting. This continued racism in the classrooms results in silencing students and ensures the absence of a safe space (Lopez, 2021).

Decolonial and anti-racist education is a complex pursuit which necessitates changes at multiple levels and across multiple platforms (Battiste, 2013; Clarke et al., 2015). Several Indigenous scholars have stated that the key to truly decolonizing and transforming the classroom is the sharing of worldviews, values, and knowledge (Battiste, 2013; Cajete, 2015). Such transformation allows students, from a variety of backgrounds, to feel safer and to have an equal presence in the classroom. The freedom to express one's whole self in the classroom allows for the development of an intercultural perspective, as well as increased self-esteem of the learner (Ortiz, 2000). In addition, it helps undermine the legitimacy of racism in the school system. In practice, however, the opportunity to engage in self-discovery and self-expression is limited by factors including institutional barriers for both student and teacher. As a

female, person of colour and as a student throughout my educational journey, I have first-hand experience of these barriers.  These barriers I first experienced as a student in elementary school and continued to encounter into my University years.  As a faculty member at TRU, I have come to realize that these barriers continue to exist within the post-secondary setting.

For my doctoral studies, my focus has been on cultivating an educational environment in which educators and students can present their whole selves in the classroom setting.  Through my studies, I have come to the realization that, for students and teachers to accomplish being their whole selves, a reciprocal relationship must be nurtured in the space of learning and sharing. In order to create this type of safe space, the imperialistic and colonial influences which are felt in these spaces must be acknowledged and dismantled.  This understanding fuelled my commitment to discovering whether social work students consider the social work classroom to be a safe space, to determine what barriers exist to creating a safe space, and to come up with recommendations for how to create a safe space in the social work classroom.

To me, a safe space is a place where I can be proud of who I am, including the colour of my skin, my ethnicity, and my worldview.  My worldview would assume a position of equality within this safe space.  For me, the Sangat is a place where I can be my whole self.  The Sangat is a place where acceptance is not only gained, but a place in which one must learn to be accepting of others.  Therefore, I will explore the Sangat as a safe space for myself and others.

## 1.7  Organization of the Thesis

The thesis is organized in the following manner.  I start by looking at the current literature focused on the creation of safe space and anti-racist/anti-oppressive/anti-colonial practice in the social work classroom.  I also explore critical race theory, the anti-oppressive framework, anti-racist theory, and anti-colonial theory which have influenced and framed my research.  From there, I review the methodology and design of the research.  I discuss the use of narrative inquiry, autoethnography, and practitioner inquiry when conducting my research, and I outline the four phases of the research: interviews with BSW students, interviews with Sangat members, application of the teachings to the social work classroom, and interviews of BSW students after

applying these teachings.  In a concluding chapter, I summarize the findings and discuss recommendations for future research.

# 2 Safe spaces and Anti-Racist Social Work Education

Writing this thesis necessitated a review of past and current literature regarding 'safe space', especially with regard to the social-work classroom setting. A review of the literature revealed differences in authors' definition of safe space, the efficacy of safe space, and the implementation of safe space. Prevalent throughout the literature was the importance of students and faculty when creating a safe space. My literature review will focus on literature most relevant to my research, including studies conducted on safety in the social-work classroom. I also explored literature pertaining to the creation of ethical space in the classroom. Last, I reviewed literature relevant to the inclusion of the Sangat in the promotion of safe space.

I approached my literature review both through the lens of my own experiences of growing up and being educated in Kamloops, and through my awareness, as a social work instructor, of the context in which many of my students go on to work. In 2021, according to the Canadian census, Kamloops had a population of 97,902, nearly 80% of whom were of European descent. The remainder were 10.45% Indigenous and 11% Asian, African, Latin American, Middle Eastern, and other (Kamloops, 2024). Social work practice in Kamloops necessitates working with clients from these diverse backgrounds. Thus, it is important both for White students to be appropriately prepared to work with racialized and Indigenous clients, and also, as the number of ethnically diverse social workers continues to grow (a trend reflected in student enrollments in the Social Work program at Thompson Rivers University), that the latter are prepared to work with clients from the culturally dominant majority. Understanding how to work with clients who have privilege needs to be included in the social work curriculum; unfortunately, this is often missing.

As I started thinking about my research question, I found myself pondering the creation of safe ethical space. I was perplexed about how to create an ethical safe space that works for all when only a handful of my students reported having a worldview that differed from the Western worldview. The complexities became apparent as I thought of a current example from my class. At the beginning of the semester, I suggested that we arrange our desks so that we sat in a circle rather than

the rows of a traditional Western university classroom. To my surprise, this was a source of frustration for many students throughout the semester. Some students reported that they felt discomfort in facing each other. I engaged my class in many discussions regarding the need to sit in the discomfort of a disrupted Western hegemony. As I thought about some of my students expressing anxiety about facing each other in class, I started to think about the complexity of the relationship with others and place. I pondered on how this would influence students' safety and ability to express their whole self in the classroom.

I also came to realize that before understanding how others were positioned relationally and culturally, it was important to understand my own relationship with others and space. In my journey of discovering "what I know", and how I make sense of what I know, several theoretical perspectives came to the forefront. Most importantly, I came to understand how much my Sikh spirituality has guided my way of knowing and influenced my understanding of the universe. The main theoretical frameworks that have informed my research include critical race theory, anti-racist theory, and anti-colonial theory.

## 2.1 Social Work Education

The profession of social work is centered on the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and/or living in poverty. Thus, social workers are committed to upholding human rights as enshrined in Canadian law, as well as in international conventions on human rights created or supported by the United Nations (CASW, 2005). Being fundamentally ingrained as part of social work practice, the Code of Ethics of the Canadian Association of Social Workers reads, in part, as follows:

> The social work profession is dedicated to the welfare and self-realization of all people; the development and disciplined use of scientific and professional knowledge; the development of resources and skills to meet individual, group, national, and international changing needs and aspirations; and the achievement of social justice for all (CASW, 2005).

Despite this declaration, it is important to acknowledge the complex history of social work and its strong ties to colonialism. As noted by Bhyan, Bejan and Jeyapal (2017), early Canadian social work leaders who formed the 'Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire' sought to recruit young English women to populate British

colonies and ensure the spread of English civility. As such, the earliest days of social work aligned with dominant and oppressive social and political ideologies that enabled cultural imperialism and genocide (Byhan, Bejal & Jeyapal, 2017). Likewise, when the University of Toronto opened the first Canadian school of social work in 1914, academics were divided on whether social work should focus on advocacy or case work (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). Thus, the noble intentions of the CASW can be seen as giving a progressive gloss to the dominant narrative of social work history in which White, middle-class women are held up as founders and exemplars of the profession while other aspects of social work's history (particularly the contributions of social workers of colour or people doing non-professionalized social work) are often invisible or marginalized (Mehrorta, Hudson, & Self, 2018).

Struggles which have existed since the beginnings of the social work profession continue to be seen in the arena of social work education. On the one hand, we find claims to the effect that social work education aims towards social justice by educating against multiple forms of oppression that impact service users and the social worker (Bhyan, Bejan, & Jeyapal, 2017). On the other hand, some critical scholars note that "research has increasingly interrogated the role of social work training in reinforcing oppressive forms of power by overemphasizing biomedical and psychodynamic approaches that have failed to address and dismantle colonial and racist structures that reproduce health inequities.… Moreover, social work training programs are establishing 'hidden curriculums' that reflect neoliberal market pressures of privileging mainstream narratives of social justice and thus hindering the extent to which social justice is integrated across social work coursework and field education" (Tang Yan et al., 2001, p.1670). These authors argue that to counter this challenge, schools must integrate critical theory and critical reflexivity. Others note that "definitional disagreements among scholars, researchers, and educators" result in "significant challenges on how to most effectively integrate social justice content and skills into social work curricula" (Nicotera, 2019, p,460). For example, when teaching about social justice, social work educators often assume that the social worker is a member of the dominant group needing to learn about the 'Other' in order to do less harm in practice (Mehrorta, Hudson & Self, 2018). Such assumptions tend to render invisible the lived experiences and knowledge of oppression that students from marginalized communities may bring into the classroom.

A growing body of scholarship examines the broad range of challenges related to the design, delivery, and assessment of courses focused on diversity.  Some academics argue that curriculum focused on social justice prioritizes individual rather than system change (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020).  Nonetheless, meaningful and intentional implementation requires an examination not just of curriculum development and pedagogical feasibility, but also the culture of the institution and the desire of administration, educators, and students to engage with anti-racism education and practice.  Some institutions have sought to fill gaps by offering optional courses focused on Indigenous issues or immigrant and refugee populations; however, this continues to position the experiences of racialized groups as outside of the mandatory curriculum (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020).  In addition to the dangers of compartmentalizing courses focused on diversity, the manner in which race and racism is addressed asks a lot from students: "it asks them to be vulnerable, examine power relations, confront privilege, and implicate themselves within the process.  For example, non-racialized students may be forced to find linkages between his, or her, self and inequity in society.  This practice may cause non-racialized students to question their identity and intentions which may evoke feelings of resistance, anxiety, discomfort, and guilt" (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020, p. 59).  Ladhani and Sitter (2020) add that racialized students may experience similar feelings.  Because many of them may have experienced  overt and covert racism in the classroom, these students may choose or inadvertently be forced into silence, or choose to speak up, running the risk of humiliation or being perceived as confrontational (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020, p 60).  In her recent edited book on student well-being, Bunjun (2021), along with her colleagues, reflects on how racialized students, feeling invisible, describe their educational environment with feelings of anger, sadness, and disappointment.

## 2.2  Inclusion and Diversity

A significant body of academic literature suggests that inclusivity and diversity require the creation of ethical and safe learning spaces for students and professors. Especially when a professor does not have lived experience of racialization, they may see microaggressions and 'innocent' racially disparaging comments made in the classroom as harmless.  However, ignoring even slight missteps contributes to the oppression faced by students of diversity (Smele et al., 2017). Racialized faculty also

experience oppression in the classroom. Throughout my time teaching in higher education, I have noticed that faculty of colour continue to be racialized in the university setting. “Regardless of the commitment academic institutions claim to diversity, equity, and inclusion, faculty of colour continue to face patterns of exclusion and barriers to tenure and promotion and are presumed less competent in and outside of the classroom” (Beeman, 2021, p.2). I wonder how can we create a safe environment for diverse students if the professors themselves face racism and oppression?

To shed light on this question, I looked at articles which explored the experience of racialized and Indigenous people in higher education as this is most relevant to my pedagogy and research study. Gibbs, Hartviksen, Lehtonen and Spruce (2021) argue that inclusion and diversity have “become emptied of meaning and become buzzwords” as they have not been conceptually clarified (p. 698). According to them, diversity (like inclusion) often acts as an institutional goal that obscures the sustained racism of institutional spaces for which it is ostensibly engaged as a repair (p.699). These authors looked at inclusion as a pedagogical principle in higher education small group teaching practice, exploring four types of classroom activity through a critical intersectional feminist lens. These activities include the use of group agreements, collaborative editing of Google documents, the collaborative online resource Padlet, and circle discussion—all frequently proposed as strategies for inclusive teaching. In all of these cases, the authors struggled to find signs of inclusion beyond the limited parameters of participation (p.708). Gibbs et al. (2021) argue that, based on their findings, teaching methods and activities alone cannot be the only strategies to foster inclusion:

> While teaching methods and activities that encourage participation certainly have their place in fostering inclusion, they should not be considered an exhaustive strategy for achieving inclusive classrooms, nor should they be seen as necessarily dealing equally well with all kinds of difference….. In particular, we suggest that the adoption of inclusion at institutional and national levels must not result in localised, context-sensitive practices being displaced by the uncritical application of centrally-mandated ‘good practice’ (Gibbs et al. 2021, p. 709).

Roberts and Smith (2002) also questioned approaches which social work programs use to address diversity. Noting that the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) calls for inclusion and diversity are vague, Roberts and Smith (2002) claim that “there exists an illusion in social work education in which curriculum, personnel, and

students reflect some level of diversity, but the organization itself is not transformed." Roberts and Smith (2002) add that in many institutional frameworks, "diversity is synonymous with heterogeneity. While the inclusiveness of this definition should be commended, a definition which includes everything is in danger of meaning nothing. An all-compassing definition of diversity provides a way of avoiding more difficult and emotionally charged issues such as racism and homophobia" (p.198). According to the authors, "a commitment to diversity means confronting all forms of oppression, including racism, within individuals, within organizations, communities, and society" (Roberts and Smith, 2002, p.198).

Finally, Doharty, Madriaga, and Joseph-Salisbury (2020) state that calls for decolonization have not helped to dismantle Whiteness; faculty of colour continue to have their well-being, careers, and daily lives impacted by racism. This conclusion was supported by their study, which "involved an exploratory, online anonymous survey of 35 social work practitioners who completed social justice coursework as part of their MSW education at an urban university in Canada" (Doharty, Madriaga & Joseph-Salisbury, 2020, p. 378). Their findings suggest that faculty of colour continue to face institutional racism, microaggressions, and fatigue, leaving them no choice but to engage in steadfast fugitive resistance. Beeman (2021) makes a similar claim using an auto-ethnographical analysis: "I address the inadequacy of such liberal initiatives to effectively challenge racial barriers to the promotion and retention of faculty of color, especially women of color" (p. 1099). She argues that in order to remain women of colour in faculty positions, more has to be done to counter the racist structure in place in universities. Beeman (2021) adds that faculty of colour are included at a superficial level and that universities fail to name and address racism (p.1099). Highlighting this fact, Smith (2018) conducted a study of the top 15 universities in Canada. He found a lack of racialized or Indigenous representation in high-ranked leadership positions such as chancellors, provosts, and vice-presidents. Moreover, a small minority of men filled positions of president (20%) and dean (4%), and racialized women were much underrepresented. A similar study conducted by Cukier et al. (2021) exploring senior leadership in all publicly funded universities found that only 13.3% of senior university leaders were non-white. Only 2.2% of the leader were racialized women.

## 2.3 Anti-Oppressive Framework

"Oppression involves the relations of domination that divide people into dominant or superior groups and subordinate or inferior groups" (Dominelli, 2002, p.8). The anti-oppressive framework, which borrows from radical, structural, feminist, anti-discriminatory, anti-racist, and critical theory, focuses on the analysis of structural oppressions and power relations underlying the issues faced by clients (Payne, 1997; Sakamoto, 2007). Within Canada, the popularity of anti-oppressive perspectives among social work scholars has prospered (Clarke, Pon, Bejamin, & Bailey, 2015). As a social work student and professor, the anti-oppressive framework has been integral to my education and pedagogy. Specifically, I find the anti-oppressive framework helpful when thinking about the different oppressions that students and instructors face in the social work classroom. As Dominelli (2002) states, "anti-oppressive measures aim to deconstruct and demystify oppressive relations – stepping stones on the road to creating non-oppressive ones" (p. 13).

Ultimately, the goal of the anti-oppressive framework is the creation of non-oppressive relations rooted in equality (Dominelli, p.13). It is this property of anti-oppressive frameworks which renders it well-suited to the creation of anti-oppressive space in the classroom. However, Dominelli (2002) cautions that oppression exists on a continuum which "extends from oppression, to anti-oppression to non-oppression". In the classroom, it is apparent that each student faces varying levels of oppression. Furthermore, it is the extent of oppression which influences how safe a student may feel in the classroom or what they may require for safety. As a professor, it is important to heed this caution when applying an anti-oppressive framework, as one would not want to replicate the structural conditions which generate entitlement or oppression.

As I was interested in applying an anti-oppressive framework in my research, I found Roni Strier's work (2007) both interesting and relevant. A social work professor at the University of Haifa, he stresses the importance of social workers engaging in Anti-Oppressive Social Work Research (AOSWR) (pp. 860-62). Macroscopically, Strier outlines the systemic study of oppression and the development of knowledge that supports people's actions to achieve freedom. Microscopically, his work focuses on the most oppressed populations that are largely excluded from the main spheres of public and economic life and disconnected from social services (p. 860-862). Strier's (2007)

perspective suggests that social work research should reject the dominant traditions of social science research. In contrast to traditional social science research, research environments which adopt an anti-oppressive framework should establish a safe space for reflection and self-inquiry. Furthermore, ongoing therapeutic support should be provided throughout the different stages of the research (p. 860-862). According to Strier (2007), social work research should be participative and welcoming of active participation. Researchers and participants should seek to engage in a subject-subject, power-balanced encounter in which each is able to explore their respective social role and the potential to overcome oppression comes by way of their shared actions (p. 860-62). Finally, Stier (2007) stresses that actionable knowledge gained through this research process remains the property of the oppressed.

Despite its promise, the anti-oppressive framework is not without its criticism. Several scholars have raised concerns that anti-oppressive discourse, while seeming to be progressive, avoids debates about racism (Clarke, Pon, Benjamin & Bailey, 2015). Illustrating this conjecture, Boatswain-Kyte et al. (2022) note that, "while posing some strengths, the adoption of an anti-oppressive practice (AOP) teachings within SSW curricula, for understanding multiple oppressions and their intersections, also presents disadvantages" (p. 158). Boatswain-Kyte et al. (2022) continues, "these courses are often taught through the lens of whiteness, catering to the exploration of White identity at the expense of learning for other racial groups" (p. 158). I agree with this critique. As a racialized student of social work, I recall in-class discussions focused on anti-oppressive ideology. During these discussions, the topic of race would be minimized, especially if the professor was not racialized. During my time as a professor, I have had many white students try to incorporate AOP in class discussions. Though I favor AOP, during these discussions, the topic of race is often absent. Walter, Taylor and Habibis (2011) add that "anti-oppressive theory is critiqued for a focus on multiple forms of oppression, which dilutes and dissipates the significance of race in everyday and institutional interactions by focusing on the allocative and authoritative resources of the worker without locating their racialized association." The same authors argue that the anti-oppressive framework remains authoritative with regard to what knowledge counts and what constitutes anti-oppressive practice. In order to circumvent the social worker's power and expert knowledge, practitioners need to engage in critical self-

reflection to ensure an egalitarian client-centered practice (Clarke, Pon, Benjamin, & Bailey, 2015).

## 2.4 Critical Race Theory

My educational experience, from Kindergarten to Doctoral studies, can be understood through the lens of critical race theory (CRT). Furthermore, CRT provides a relevant framework for my research by illuminating the role of race in the creation of a safe space. Although CRT originated in the field of law, it has since been adopted by many different disciplines including education and social work. Derrick Bell (1995) defined CRT as a "body of legal scholarship committed to the struggle against racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by law" (p.898). Bell states that CRT-ists are committed to acknowledging and overthrowing their own racial privilege. Thus, for educators, adoption of CRT can assist with the creation of safety in the classroom as it promises to eradicate the racial privilege some students hold over others.

I am drawn to CRT because of its call to activism. Crenshaw (2011), for example, states that CRT was developed through activism and action:

> Indeed, one might say that CRT was the offspring of a post-civil rights institutional activism that was generated and informed by an oppositionalist orientation toward racial power. Activists' demands that elite institutions rethink and transform their conceptions of 'race neutrality' in the face of functionally exclusionary practices engendered a particularly concrete defense of the status quo. These defenses in turn produced precisely the apologia for institutionalized racial dominance that critics of the dominant thinking on 'race relations' had voiced both historically and in more recent struggles over the terms of knowledge production in the academy (Crenshaw, 2011, p.1260).

Because there is a need for institutional activism in order to dismantle the oppressive structures of society, including those of postsecondary education, CRT's conceptualization is appealing to me.

A significant number of studies involving CRT originate in the United States. Perhaps this is academics responding to the prevalence of racism against America's Black population. However, whether we want to admit it or not, racism, extending to fields such as education and social work, continues to exist in our Canadian culture and society. Racism, both overt and covert, can be understood in historical terms.

Throughout modern times, due to colonial history, it has been White people who hold the social, political, and economic power to name and categorize people of colour and Indigenous peoples; in Canada, as in many countries, Whiteness is maintained as the 'norm' that other races are measured against (Alberta Civil Liberties Research Center, 2020). Dalal (2002) states that "racialization is a very complex and contradictory process through which groups come to be designated as being part of a particular 'race' and, on that basis, subjected to differential and/or unequal treatment". Stated in simpler words, "racialization is the process of manufacturing and utilizing the notion of race in any capacity" (Weigels and Howes, 1995, cited in Zhong, 2007, p.27). I first heard this term when someone told me to apply at TRU as "they are looking for racialized instructors". I remember going home to read about this term as it had not come up in any of my studies thus far. It concisely described my experiences in my personal, educational, and professional life.

Racialization not only impacts an individual externally; the intricacies of racialization are often internalized by victims themselves. This is a process that I experienced. During my early university years, I recall myself internalizing the racialization as material was presented from a White gaze and racialized people were seen as other. As we were looking at people of colour as "other" and their worldviews as being different, this made me feel othered as well. This feeling of otherness resulted in the classroom feeling unsafe and, as a result, an entity which held the power to quieten me throughout most of my university years. Though I speak of my university years, my first experiences of racialization occurred during my high school years. For example, when in grade 8, my locker was sandwiched between two White girls who were both older than me. Living close to the high school, I always went home for lunch. Upon returning to the school after lunch, these girls would tell me that I stank because I smelled like East Indian food. They bullied me for the majority of the school year until I could no longer handle the abuse and decided to move my locker.

It should be noted that individuals of colour, as well as Indigenous peoples, are not the only people who are racialized. However, the process of racialization is different for White people. Weigels and Howes (1995) state that "while White people are also racialized, this process is often rendered invisible or normative to those designated as White. As a result, White people may not see themselves as part of a race but still maintain the authority to name and racialize 'others'" (cited in Zhong, 2007). This

insight is exemplified by my grade 8 experience. At that time, there was no dialogue about privilege in school. As White food was considered the norm, the reaction of the girls was legitimized and there was no recourse for the school to stop the bullying. Unfortunately, in the absence of any real consequence for such expression of privilege, racialization of White people results in the perpetuation of White dominance. As stated by Dyer (1997), "as long as race is something applied only to non-White people, as long as White people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people… The point of seeing the racing of Whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world" (cited in Holliday et al., 2010, p. 152-153).

How can racialized individuals create or experience safety in a classroom that continues to be based on a racialized system? CRT can help practitioners understand the hegemonic normalcy of Whiteness and how it translates into the classroom setting.

Over many years, educators and researchers have applied critical race theory to both Education and Social Work Classrooms. Solorzano (1998) applied critical race theory in his exploration of racial- and gender-based macroaggressions and educational experiences of Chicana and Chicano scholars. He states that "critical race theory challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism as they relate to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups" (p. 122). Solorzana's (1998) study resonated for me as it was congruent with my own pedagogy and research methods. He speaks of the five themes that form the pedagogy, research method and perspective of applying CRT in education:

> 1. The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism: Critical race theory starts from the premise that race and racism are endemic, and central rather than marginal factor while still being viewed at their intersection with other forms of subordination such as gender and class discrimination.
>
> 2. The challenge to dominant ideology: A critical race theory in education challenges the traditional claims of the educational system and its institutions to objectivity, meritocracy, colour and gender blindness, race and gender neutrality, and equal opportunity.

> 3. The commitment to social justice: Critical race theory has an overall commitment to social justice and the elimination of racism.
>
> 4. The centrality of experiential knowledge: Critical race theory recognizes that the experiential knowledge of women and men of colour is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education.
>
> 5. The interdisciplinary perspective: A critical race theory in education challenges ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most analyses and insists on analyzing race and racism in education by placing them in both a historical and contemporary context using interdisciplinary methods. (Solorzana,1998, p.122)

The use of CRT in education continues to uncover many inequalities that exist in our educational settings, including higher education (Ledesma & Claderon, 2015). Ledesama and Claderon (2015) conducted a review of past and current literature examining the development of CRT in education and its use in higher education. Pushing back on critics of CRT, they argue that CRT gives tools to educators to move past merely pointing out racism and to engage with the material, structural, and ideological mechanisms of White supremacy. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Patton (2016) focus on higher education and the challenges associated with moving the academy forward in a way that explicitly names racist/White supremacy in areas such as college access, curriculum, and policy. Although Patton's (2016) work focused on the educational system in the United States, Canada's education system is plagued with similar challenges. In his article, Patton (2016) demonstrates the need for educators to foreground race, name White supremacy, disrupt dominant, Eurocentric ideologies, challenge neutrality and colourblindness, and legitimize the experiences of people of colour.

CRT's use of storytelling, narrative, and first-person methods is well-suited to my research topic. As Bell (1995) states, "CRT writing and lecturing is characterized by frequent use of the first-person, storytelling, narrative, allegory, interdisciplinary treatment of law, and the unapologetic use of creativity." Solarzano and Yosso (2002) and Patton (2016) state that the use of unorthodox methodology "challenges the norm by highlighting stories not told thereby countering the 'master narratives' in society." Outside of my home, expressing my story as fact was never an option as I thought that no one would believe me. This experience is true for many people of colour as their stories are often negated or reduced to expressions of irrational and misplaced feelings.

Thus, CRT's promise of validation is its main attraction for me. As stated by Crenshaw (2002), CRT promotes the legitimization of stories told by people of colour.

## 2.5 Anti-Racist Theory

Over the past several years, overt racial injustices against many racialized groups have been occurring in North America. Anti-racist practice, as adopted by the field of social work, responds to these injustices by assuming an "explicit political stance" in which "race, as a point of entry" is used to "counter the pervasive denial of systemic and structural racism" (in Canada) (Clarke, Pon, Benjamin, & Bailey, 2015). Throughout my educational career, I have found that race is often minimized in anti-oppressive practice. As such, I find it important to include the anti-racist framework in my study, as this minimization of race can be experienced by students in the social work classroom. Given the overt and covert racism which racialized students endure, the classroom may be a space where they feel silenced, discriminated against, and made to relive or disclose painful personal experiences (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020). Course content reflecting an anti-racist pedagogy has the potential to open discussions on issues such as Whiteness (Hamilton & Schneider, 2018).

Racism has resulted in the exclusion of racialized and Indigenous individuals from employment in social services and professorships in the field of social work (Clarke, Pon, Benjamin, & Bailey, 2015). Given this, there has been a call for the revival of anti-racist education in social work (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020). As Hamilton & Schneider (2015) state, anti-racist education can help students to become effective in social work practice and effective as change agents in society. The utility and suitability of the anti-racism framework for social work initiatives is reflective of its explicitness in identifying and addressing race as a matter of power and equity, acknowledgment of the importance of lived experience, and focus on politicizing education to uncover and dismantle the structural roots of inequality (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020; Singh, 2019). Thus, students exposed to and immersed in anti-racism pedagogy are taught to identity and counter racist ideas and actions in themselves and in others, which necessitates critical examination of White privilege (Hamilton & Schneider, 2018).

Despite the promise of the antiracism framework, antiracism remains largely invisible and insignificant in the courses, readings and assignments that make up the

social work curriculum (Singh, 2019). Shah et al. (2021) reviewed course outlines in Social Work BSW courses in Quebec. Results indicated a “near absence” of anti-racist education in the programs. As Hamilton and Schneider (2018) explain, antiracism pedagogy invites students to be critical of social work, and not all institutions may be willing to extend that invitation. According to Jeffery (2005), faculty may also struggle in practice with applying an anti-racist perspective. First, they may not have empirically-validated tools for, or experience of, applying an antiracist pedagogy (Jeffery, 2005; Hamilton & Schneider, 2018). As such, they may find it difficult to integrate anti-racist materials into the social work curricula while covering the numerous competencies required by the Council on Social Work Education (Hamilton & Schneider, 2018). Second, the anti-racism model asserts that White individuals in positions of power play a role in perpetuating institutionally racist practices (Hamilton & Schneider, 2018). Thus, the anti-racism model requires Whites to not only acknowledge their participation in racism, but also make an active commitment to interrupt racism (Hamilton & Schneider, 2018). As White students often work ‘unknowingly’ or ‘unquestioningly’ in practice learning settings, with little concern for issues of anti-racism, this may be a difficult task for many students, as well as educators who have been accustomed to focusing on the ‘other’ (Singh, 2019). Finally, given the possibility of student resistance, faculty may feel concerned that teaching from an anti-racism perspective may lead to negative course evaluations (Hamilton & Schneider, 2018). For example, course evaluations completed by white students for a Race, Racialization, and Immigration class I taught included comments that I believed “white students don’t know how racism feels” and I was “too negative about racism”.

## 2.6 Anti-Colonial Framework

Reflecting on Michael Hart’s (2003) article, “Am I a Modern Day Missionary”, I found myself pondering on the role social work continues to play in continuing colonization. In his article, Hart questions social work values. Does social work uphold the values of missionaries? Does the influence of European/Western ideology influence the social work code of ethics?

> As a social worker, I would like to believe that the only characteristic that social workers share with missionaries is the desire to help others. However, as I move forward as a social worker, I continue to reflect upon whether the social work profession has more in common with missionaries

> than this altruistic belief. This reflection was intensified after a discussion I had with a Cree woman who worked in the field but was not trained as a social worker. When she found out I was educated as a social worker, she stated, "Oh, so you're the social missionary." (Hart, 2003, p. 300)

Clarke et al. (2012) note that mainstream social work was, and continues to be, rooted in Eurocentric/Anglo-American values, and that despite espousing values of advocacy, human rights, social justice, and equity, social work continues to be a colonial tool of the Canadian state. "Indigenous people have been significantly marginalized in, if not excluded from, the development, administration, practice, teaching, and oversight of social work. The majority of Indigenous theories that could relate to social work remain in place at community levels but are not well incorporated in the field or professional literature" (Hart, 2019, p. 269). Unfortunately, as long as Western/European ideologies remain at the forefront of education, it will be difficult to dismantle the colonialism ingrained in social work education (Hart, 2019).

An important criticism of anti-racist pedagogy in Canada points to its exclusion of an Indigenous perspective, and failure to recognize both the presence of Indigeneity and ongoing colonialism in the settler society (Clarke et al., 2015). The anticolonial framework offers insight into how colonial and imperial subjugation has affected and continues to affect Indigenous knowledge production, identity, and representation, and places a strong emphasis on resistance via individual and collective agency (Khan, 2019). As Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001) state, anticolonialism interrogates the power configurations embedded in ideas, cultures, and histories of knowledge production, validation, and use. Moreover, an anticolonial stance calls for an end to divisive loyalties based on such binary oppositions as us/them, individual/collective, local/global, national/international, and so on (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001). By interrogating these power structures, this framework allows the reader to understand the complicity between knowledge production and the sociopolitical contexts in which the knowledges were produced (Khan, 2019).

Khan (2019) states that the inclusion of an anticolonial framework will provide social work educators and researchers with the tools needed to understand the complicity between power and knowledge production, since social work's knowledge base is grounded in Eurocentric frameworks which privilege and normalize Whiteness. Indeed, proponents of anticolonial ideology use Indigenous knowledge to theorize and

critique issues emerging from colonial and colonized relations (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001). In this way, the currently and formerly colonized are empowered to resist imposed hegemonies. Inferiorization, belittlement, humiliation and mockery of Indigenous values are essential for the maintenance and persistence of colonialism (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001). As expressed by Smith (1999) and Hart (2016), increased presence of anticolonial ideology reflects Indigenous resurgence against colonial frameworks which have been present since the earliest days of colonization (Carlson, 2016). In the field of social work, Absolon (2010), Hart (2009), Simmons and Dei (2012), and Tamburro (2013) document an increase in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous social workers and scholars actively engaged in decolonizing social work education, practice, and research through the application of anti-colonial frameworks.

Carlson (2016) states that in practice, the anticolonial framework acknowledges, respects, and engages with the protocols and natural laws of the Indigenous lands where it is conducted, thereby promoting participation and egalitarianism. Furthermore, anti-colonial ideology safeguards the self-determination and autonomy of those involved in research (Carlson, 2016). As Khan (2019) explains, because marginalized individuals are viewed as subjects of their own experiences and histories, they are able to reclaim their identities. For me, this resonated greatly, as the aim of my research is to empower individuals of colour. However, in order to appreciate the subjects' biographies, researchers adopting an anti-racist perspective must be critically aware of the historical and institutional structures and contexts which sustain colonialism (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001). Similar to anti-oppressive frameworks, researchers adopting an anti-racist perspective must practice self-reflexivity and power-sharing as they examine their own social locations in regards to research and settler colonialism (Carlson, 2016; Hart, 2009). For the White researcher, this practice may give rise to feelings of defensiveness, fear, entitlement, and denial as they come to terms with their "White lens" and Western way of thinking (Carlson, 2016; Clarke et al., 2012).

## 2.7 Safe Space

In order to transform and decolonize education, students must be afforded the opportunity to be safe in the classroom. As stated by Villanueva (2013) and Shahjahan (2005), an environment which is both safe and ethical fosters the authentic self. Such an environment is referred to as a 'safe space.' Holly and Steiner (2005, p. 50) define

‘safe space’ as a “climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.” Such a climate promotes authentic self-expression and authentic communication (Barrett, 2010; Boostrom, 1998).

My own understanding of authentic self-expression and authentic communication has come from my participation in the Sangat. This influenced my thinking about and approach to safe space in this study. For me, the concept of the authentic self speaks to being one’s whole self—that is, not holding back important parts of who one is. This is valuable both for being more fully present to a situation (for example, learning in a classroom setting), but also because one can contribute more to others' learning or to the wisdom of the group. “Truth”, from a Sikhi perspective, is owned by no one; therefore, everyone’s “truth” has something unique to add to the community's understanding. This idea is explored further in my discussion of the Sangat.

It is common for classrooms not to feel like safe spaces for some or all of the students. In such a setting, for students to risk self-disclosure, the rewards must outweigh the penalties; that is, the opportunity for personal growth and professional development must be greater than the risk of possible embarrassment or risk of receiving a lower course grade. Although Holly and Steiner agree that the creation of a safe space can reduce the negative outcomes experienced by students willing to risk disclosure, they do not recognize that some students may have more to risk than others (2005. p. 50).

In the article, “Safe Spaces: Reflections on an Educational Metaphor”, Boostrom (1998) defines safe space as a “metaphor for classroom life, according to which (1) we are all isolated, (2) our isolation is both physical and psychic, (3) we can become less isolated by expressing our diverse individuality, and (4) students thrive in a classroom in which individuality is freely expressed” (1998, p.398). According to Boostrom, students often interpret a 'safe space' to be an environment which is non-judgmental, unbiased, and uncritically accepting of their unique individuality, a form of intellectual relativism in which no knowledge, opinions, attitudes, experiences and beliefs can legitimately be the object of judgment.

Graham (2021) discusses the important of keeping safe spaces “as they were originally intended to function,” as affinity groups for marginalized students. These groups provide social support, shared sense of identity, sharing of experiences and mentorship.  According to Graham (2021), he discusses the idea of brave spaces where there is a balance of having true safe places where marginalized students can retreat from real threats and demands yet facilitate classrooms where students can process new and uncomfortable ideas productively.

Boostrom cautions us to be careful about using the safe space metaphor without thinking about the complexity of the meaning.  Barrett (2010) contends that “safety is a privilege often conferred on students who already occupy dominant and empowered positions, both inside and outside of the classroom.”  As such, Ludlow (2004) wonders if it is possible to provide safety for racially, socially, and/or economically marginalized students?   A second concern aired by academics is that the popular conception of 'safe space' runs counter to the promotion of critical thinking and intellectual development (Barrett, 2010; Boostrom, 1998).  According to this argument, 'safe space' inhibits the development of critical thought as one’s views go unchallenged (Barrett, 2010; Boostrom, 1998).

> Is it possible to `attend to the plurality of consciousnesses’ without censoring critical thinking? I hope so, but it can’t be done by turning the classroom into a `safe space’, a place in which teachers rule out conflict. When everyone’s voice is accepted, and no one’s voice can be criticized, then no one can grow. The tendency of `safe space’ talk to censor critical reflection turns sympathy into sentimentality, open-mindedness into empty-headedness. (Boostrom, p. 407)

Alan Hodkinson (2015) critiques the concept of safe space and the employment of safe space as an educational concept.  Hodkinson's argument is that safe spaces are, in fact, 'warped spaces.' Hodkinson discusses his frustration with using safe space as a shallow paradigm.  When creating safe spaces, we must ponder questions such as what does space mean?  How do these spaces create meaning and what might specific safe spaces do?  Finally, educators must ask themselves, are safe spaces actually needed at all? (Hodkinson, 2015).

Further critique of safe space comes from Flensnerk and Van der Lippe (2019). In their article, “Being safe from what and from whom? A critical discussion of the conceptual metaphor of ‘safe space',” they stress the importance of the classroom

being a learning environment characterized by safety and respect, and consider the following questions: From what harm does a safe space keep you? Who does it keep safe? What makes the classroom an unsafe place? In addition to various forms of intimidation, harassment, and attacks, discussions about certain issues and topics can be perceived as threatening. They argue that instead of promising safety to students, the metaphor “classroom of disagreement” may be more useful (Flensnerk and Van der Lippe, 2019).

To explore the role of context in the creation of safe space, Holly and Steiner (2005) conducted an exploratory study in which questionnaires were distributed to 121 BSW and MSW students at Western University. This study explored student perceptions about the importance of safe space, the effect of safe space on academic experience, and the role of safe space in encouraging honest and open dialogue. Recognizing that dominant/subordinated group status affects students’ classroom experiences, Holly and Steiner (2005, p.52) also explored factors which may have influenced students’ perceptions of taking a safe class. Those students who reported experiencing a safe space felt that the experience expanded their perspectives and increased their self-awareness. Students described the creation of a safe space as being important and influential in their learning experience.

The research revealed four factors which result in unsafe environments (Holly & Steiner, 2005, p. 58):

> instructor (being critical towards students; biased, opinionated or judgmental; not considering others' perspectives; reliant on didactic format; rude when disagreeing with students; and not responding to students' comments);
>
> peer (being afraid to speak; being biased, judgmental, or closed-minded; being apathetic about the course; trying to please the instructor; and being frustrated, angry, or hostile);
>
> self (not participating, being fearful, worried, intimidated, insecure, or feeling vulnerable; and not investing in the course); and
>
> environment (seating not conducive to discussion; small room; and uncomfortable temperature).

Conversely, these same four factors were also found to contribute to the creation of a safe space (Holly & Steiner, 2005, p. 58):

instructor (being non-judgmental; developing/modeling group rules; being comfortable with conflict; respecting others' opinions; encouraging class participation; demonstrating caring; challenging students; sharing about his/her self; and being informative, laid back, and flexible);

peer (possessing good discussion skills; sharing honestly; being non-judgmental; having a sense of community; encouraging critical thinking; and possessing a positive attitude);

self (being open-minded; sharing honestly; participating actively; being respectful and supportive of others; preparing for class; feeling comfortable; listening actively; and investing in class); and

environment (seating which allows for seeing everyone; being appropriate room size for number of students; and, having good lighting).

Holly and Steiner (2005) state that the “relatively small number of males, as well as students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender prevented a thorough exploration of differences in their perception of safe and unsafe spaces… Similarly, the relative small number of students of colour precluded analysis of the responses of specific ethnic groups” (p. 60). The results also failed to find any major differences among gender, race/ethnicity, or program groups. Finally, they recognized limitations in the use of a survey, as it does not allow further explanation of terms or opportunities for clarification.[5]

In the article, ’What is a Safer Space’, Garran and Rasmussen (2014) critique the concept of safe space. Similar to Holley and Steiner (2005), Garran and Rasmussen (2014) ponder the following questions: “What does safety actually mean? For whom is the classroom really safe? Is safety experienced in the same way by each student? What are the components of identity that might contribute to differential experience? How does the instructor's identity influence conditions of safety and for whom? Does the experience of safety change over the course of a semester or program?” (p.402). They believe instructors generally understand the importance of safety in the classroom for students to engage in meaningful self-reflection, self-discovery, and student engagement. They also note differences in reflection and

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[5] These limitations were informative for my own work. I wondered if the use of focus groups would help to elicit more subjective and personal information. In order to answer these questions, I utilized both individual and group interviews to help students clarify meanings they attached to significant teachings (see chapters 3 and 4).

exploration in group versus individual settings. Finally, Garran and Rasmussen (2014) discuss the role of power and privilege in establishing feelings of safety.

Garran and Rasmussen (2014) ask us to ponder whether safety is experienced by all students in the same way? As I reflected on the validity of this question, I was reminded of a relevant experience.

I *was teaching a Social Work Groups class at TRU. Adhering to experiential teaching methodology, this class (which focused on racism) was delivered in a group format. We were involved in a very engaging, and intense, class dialogue. During this discussion, I noticed that a younger Aboriginal student seemed intent to talk; yet she remained silent. One of the students, another Aboriginal student, considered to be an elder by peers, spoke about her experiences of racism in social work practice. The elder Aboriginal student's reflections encouraged the younger Aboriginal student to speak up. The younger Aboriginal student acknowledged that she had wanted to say something but, in line with First Nations' protocol, she waited for an elder to speak first. By waiting for the elder Aboriginal student to speak, the younger Aboriginal student helped to create a space that was safe for her and her elder. My first inclination was to ask the younger Aboriginal student if she had something to say; however, I decided to let her choose when she spoke as I recognized we had different world views and there may be a reason for her hesitation. When she explained the protocol, I was relieved that I had given her the space to participate as she was able to follow her own path.*

Garrin and Rasmussen (2014) state that students belonging to dominant groups may be examining their privilege for the first time. Such students may fear the possibility of hurting others or being exposed. Conversely, the students belonging to non-dominant groups may be afraid to react, whether out of sadness or rage (p. 407). Garrin and Rasmussen (2014) offer recommendations for instructors who desire to establish a safe space. Their recommendations include creating a shared understanding of safety; sustaining an environment in which students can be open, spontaneous, and authentically engaging in challenging discourse; addressing breakdowns; and using various pedagogical techniques and methods with formal

institutional support to teach material on oppression, social justice, and diversity (p. 409). [6]

Agreeing that examining -isms, power, privilege, and oppression is an essential part of social-work education, Werman, Adlparvar, Horowitz and Hasegawa (2017) explored difficult conversations in the social work classroom. Students and faculty completed separate versions of a survey which focused on “perceptions of safety in the classroom and the competence of faculty in facilitating difficult conversations” (Werman et al., 2017, p. 251). Students rated the experience of having difficult conversations more negatively than did faculty. “The overarching theme... was that students were uncomfortable having sensitive conversations within the confines of a school of social work, a place that should ostensibly lend itself to the safe exploration of difficult topics” (Werman et al., 2017, p. 61). The most prevalent barrier identified by students (80%) was lack of confidence in faculty's ability to address conflict and discomfort in the classroom. This was followed by lack of confidence in faculty's ability to manage moments of microaggression (80%), faculty being uncomfortable speaking up about microaggressions in the class (75%), the classroom not being a safe place to discuss issues of power, privilege, and oppression (72%), fear of reprisal from faculty for challenging them or expressing criticism of the class (74%), lack of confidence in faculty's ability to create a safe and inclusive environment to discuss -isms (72%), and lack of confidence in faculty's ability to facilitate productive conversations that lead to learning and growth (63%) (Werman et al., 2017; p.255). The majority of respondents expressed the need for courses and training for students to help them be more fluent in having difficult conversations.

## 2.8 Ethical Space

Western ideology continues to maintain dominance within the Canadian education setting. In the social work classroom, students holding different perspectives and worldviews find themselves alienated by this framework. Although academics have

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[6] Garrin and Rasmussen (2014) recommend further exploration of instructors' and students' subjective experiences of safety in the classroom through qualitative research methodology; they also highlight the importance of exploring the instructor's identity as it relates to safety. My research honors these recommendations by looking at the subjective experience of students and myself (as an instructor) through the use of narrative inquiry and autoethnography (see Chapter 3).

identified factors which promote the creation of a safe space, there is no consensus with regard to the equality of the space. To address this gap, I have reviewed extant literature focusing on the concept of ethical space. I have come to the realization that when contemplating the concept of ethical space, we must consider the factors needed to create more equal space.

Ethical space was first presented by Poole and later re-examined by Indigenous scholars Willie Ermine and Marie Batiste. In the book *Toward Deep Subjectivity*, Poole (1972) talks about an encounter involving two people who occupied different social locations. Analysing the situation, Poole (1972) conjectured that because these two may hold different intentions, a resulting 'space' may have existed between them. Poole cautions that this space should not be seen as empty. Rather, in this space, that which "remains hidden and enfolded are the deeper level thoughts, interests, and assumptions that will inevitably influence the kinds of relationships the two can have" (cited in Ermine, 2007, p. 195). With regard to the emergence of space, Poole (1972) states that "there are two sets of space because there are two sorts of intentions. The intentions structure the space in two different ways." Poole continues, "when the two sets of intentions confront each other then ethical space is set up instantaneously" (cited in Ermine, 2007, p 195). This space, which Ermine (cited in Ermine, 2007, p.195) suggests may pertain to cultures or worldviews must be considered ethically as it has the potential to influence and provoke change (Poole, 1972). Thus, when considering the "space between the (two) knowledges", one should not understand it as "a merge or clash. Rather, it is a space that is new, electrifying, and even contentious…" (cited in Ermine, 2007, p.105).

To conceptualize this idea, I think back to when I was a young student sitting in the class of a White woman holding a dominant worldview. The teacher and I (a second generation racialized student) held different intentions within the classroom. Superficially, my intention was to win her approval, do well in class, and feel respected. I assume that the teacher's motive was to meet some partly tacit set of standards related to the dominate worldview. Ergo, the space between us was multi-layered including differences in power, privilege, background, and interests. These differences influenced our relationship. It is possible that the differences which lie between were unappreciated by both the teacher and I. However, it is these same differences, unexplored, which result in an impasse of understanding and a barrier to

transformation. Today, I am more appreciative of these hidden or unspoken intentions in the spaces where I exist. Rather than look at these intentions superficially, I choose to query how these “spaces in between” can help us imagine a more equal relationship.

Ermine (2011) found “borrowing the idea of ethical space” (from Poole) necessary as, for him, the university experience “just did not feel right”. Ermine speaks about the idea of ethical space resonating for him. Ermine states that he “needed to talk about this area between knowledge systems” and how this knowledge was being used in the university setting. For him, there lied a difference between the “knowledge produced in the university” and “how I experienced my own community, my own people working with knowledge” (Ermine, 2007). This space, Ermine believed, constitutes ethical space. Specifically, Ermine (2007) states, “ethical space is formed when two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other” (p.193). This concept is relevant to the social work classroom as students espousing a Western worldview often have difficulty knowing how to engage with other worldviews.

Ermine urges us to examine social systems, how colonialism exists in these systems and how people are caught in these systems. According to Ermine (2010), people have to take up the idea of ethical space and “do something with the idea” and not just talk about it. Ermine (2007) defines ethics as the “capacity to know what harms or enhances the well-being of others” (p.195). Thus, when considering space, Ermine (2007) states that we must remain cognizant of “moral thresholds that we will not cross” as we are “equally sensitive to others infringing or imposing on those spaces” (p.195). Ermine describes his interpretation of Poole’s ethical spaces ideas as follows:

> This idea is further developed here to create the analogy of a space between two entities, as a space between the Indigenous and Western thought worlds. The space is initially conceptualized by the unwavering construction of difference and diversity between human communities. These are the differences that highlight uniqueness because each entity is moulded from a distinct history, knowledge tradition, philosophy, and social and political reality. With the calculated disconnection through the contrasting of their identities, and the subsequent creation of two solitudes with each claiming their own distinct and autonomous view of

> the world, a theoretical space between them is opened (Ermine, 2007, 195).

The concept of ethical space may be helpful in creating dialogue between Western and Indigenous thought and knowledge (Ermine, 2007). However, Ermine (2007) states that Western ideology in political and social life has blurred the existence of differences in cultural knowledge. "Western universality has resulted in a singular world consciousness, a monoculture with a claim to one model of humanity and one model of society" (Ermine, 2007, p. 198). Ermine (2007) adds that "we no longer know what informs each of our identities and what should guide the association with each other" (p.197). As such, "with our ethical standards under consideration, we necessarily have to think about the transgression of those standards by others and how our actions may infringe or violate the space of others" (Ermine, 2007, p.195).

In Marie Battiste's (2013) discussion of "decolonizing education", she describes "ethical space as an enabling space where Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples can truthfully speak to the predicaments and issues that face them and the standards they speak for" (2013, p. 105). However, in order for us to create ethical space, Battiste calls for a deeper philosophical analysis of modern thought and educational practices (p. 105). Batiste urges us to look at how Indigenous knowledge and other knowledges are treated in our society. Indigenous knowledge and other worldviews are seen as additive to current education practices, without educators interrogating their own assumptions and locations (Battiste, 2013, p. 108). As stated by Battiste, "Indigenous knowledge is treated as if it is a by-product of domestic politics among Aboriginal peoples" (p. 105). Therefore, ethical space will remain difficult to create as long as Western ideology remains the dominant ideology while non-Western ideologies remain 'othered'. To make the creation of ethical space a possibility, Battiste calls on educators to consider the role they may play in perpetuating colonization in the classroom. As stated by Battiste (p.124), "generating an ethical space in the curricula requires animating Indigenous humanity and science to engage students with their own histories, their own complicities with the dominating forces of the past, to give them a new sense of awareness of holism, connectedness, and grounding of their own power to activate change in themselves and other and ultimately the future of humanity."

Despite these engaging discussions on the creation of ethical space, there are very few resources which teach us how to implement ethical space in practice (Nikolakis & Hotte, 2022). Using Ermine's definition of ethical space, Nikolakis and Hotte contend that an "ethical space" approach creates a cooperative spirit among Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners by shifting existing asymmetrical relationships to those that honour different worldviews and forms of knowledge (Ermine, 2007; Indigenous Council of Experts, 2018). According to the authors, the creation of an ethical space requires engaging in dialogue in order to acknowledge each other's worldview. However, an ethical space cannot be created unless dialogue is engaged in, along with both reflection and introspection, in order to name the ways in which colonialism positions the participants the partners unequally (Nikolakis & Hotte, 2022, p.2). Similarly, Osmond-Johnson and Turner (2020) argue that it is possible to create ethical space (as defined by Ermine) when non-Indigenous actors work with Indigenous communities on "equal ground". However, they warn that the work of navigating the ethical space between Indigenous and non-Indigenous views is complex and complicated (2020, p.74).

Dawson and Robinson (2021), using Ermine's concept of ethical space, examine closely how ethical space was created in the context of Indigenous-led educational forums. Students were invited "to begin to put Indigenous worldviews on a equal footing, side by side with the hegemonic western epistemology, in order to create a new approach to learning that is ethical and reciprocal" (p.314). Based on the feelings of mutual respect reported by students when engaging in dialogue and respectful relationships during the forums, Dawson and Robinson (2021) argue that ethical space was enabled by ensuring cultural safety, exploring the history of colonial relationships, and grounding in cultural humility. By adopting a relational approach, students were able to learn new ways of knowing while challenging colonial individualism and progressivism. "The Dialogue introduced a profoundly relational approach to knowledge and thus challenged the old colonial juggernaut of individualism and progressivism. Using the framework of Willie Ermine's 'ethical spaces', it allowed students to envision a pedagogy of mutual respect for Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing" (Dawson and Robinson, 2021, p. 314).

Finally, Kelly Laurila (2019) speaks on the concept of ethical space in her dissertation, "Reconciliation: Facilitating ethical space between Indigenous women and

girls of a drum circle and White Settler men of a police chorus". Although the creation of ethical space seemed unlikely between the two parties observed in this study, an ethical space involving the women and girls and the police officers was created by engaging in song. "Through engagement, an ethical space was created that enabled dialogue and understanding of one another, and a critical consciousness of the need for ideological systemic change in policing policies and practices" (Laurila, 2019, p.ix). Based on her findings, Laurila (2019) states, "common themes that are critical in the social work profession are: relationships, reflexivity, ethical space and engagement. I think that the understanding and application of these aspects needs to take place within a decolonizing lens" (p. 286). Laurila suggests a template for social workers to use with Indigenous families to create an ethical space in order to "understand self and resistance because of various histories, animosities, experiences, preconceived ideas, and not knowing" (2019, p.287). In thinking about ethical space, I am drawn to my own experience of the safe, ethical space within the Sangat.

## 2.9 Sangat as a Safe, Ethical Space

> *ਬਿਸ੍ਰਾਮ ਪਾਏ ਮਿਲਿ ਸਾਧਸੰਗਿ ਤਾ ਤੇ ਬਹੁੜਿ ਨ ਧਾਉ ॥੧॥*
>
> *Joining the Sat Sangat, I have found peace and tranquility; I shall not wander away from there again.* — Guru Granth Sahib (Search Gurbani 2018)

As I started my post-secondary education in social work, I realized that much of what I know is based on my Sikhi knowledge. "How I experience the world is different from how you experience the world, and both our interpretations matter" (Aluli-Meyer, 2008, p. 218). The knowledge afforded to me by my spiritual practice of Sikhism guides my relationship with the world. Through the tenets of Sikhism, I am aware that I am inherently at one with nature which includes all beings, place, and cosmos. There is a passage in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib (the central Holy Scripture of Sikhism), in the Japji Sahib (Guru Nanak's writing that is at the beginning of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib) that speaks to this relationship.

> ਪਵਣੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਪਾਣੀ ਪਿਤਾ ਮਾਤਾ ਧਰਤਿ ਮਹਤੁ ॥
>
> "Air is our guru, water is our father, and the great earth our mother." – Sri Guru Granth Sahib (Search Gurbani, 2018)

According to Prill (2015), this passage "suggests a sense of inter-connectedness and even intimacy with the natural world" (p. 227). Furthermore, Sikh faith urges its devotees to seek the "True Word" rather than becoming stuck in our own egos and desires. Sikh gurus declare that the "True Word can never be owned by any one individual, any one language, any one region or location." In addition, Guru Nanak spoke of equality regardless of caste, gender, class, ethnicity, language, race, religion, place, and/or certification." Bophal suggests that "this openness is dependent on the recognition of the other" (2012, p. 193). As my interest in students' experience of safe space grew, I started to connect this to understanding each person's truth in the classroom. To separate from our ego and understand our truth, we must be open to, and recognize, others' truths. Specifically, I considered the possibility that truth may be open to all and not owned by anyone; in that case, one's access to truth is dependent on the recognition of the other in dialogue. As noted above, the "True Word" in this sense is connected to the entire universe which includes non-human forms such as place. I wonder how this Sikh understanding can be applied to the ethical space in the classroom setting?

I reflected on my experience with my students as they sat in their desks in the classroom. Once again, I pondered on the frustration my students experienced while facing each other in the classroom due to the changing desk formation. This thought triggered in me the realization that dualism is prevalent in Western thought and ideology. According to Scarborough (2009), the West has learned to live in the contraries and contradictions of dualistic thinking (p.15). He suggests that there may be many reasons why many people are unwilling to give up dualism: it may be valued as necessary, believed to provide clarity or rationality, and portrayed as connecting relationships on a single logical level (p. 14). As I sat in the temple, I thought back to my experience in the classroom, with my students sitting each at their own single desk, an arm's width apart from other students, facing forward… Now, there was me, in the temple, sitting cross-legged side-by-side with my fellow community members, all of us connected to the ground, place and earth. I started to think about how my Sikhi experience might relate to Scarborough's discussion of the "middle way" and its application to the social work classroom.

Sikhism embraces the concept of non-duality. Balbinder Singh Bhogal (2012) notes that the concept of duality, as referenced by Lourdunathan (1986), "is false as it

denies the existence of continuity between states" (2012). Bhogal (2012) suggests that "'Sikh Dharam' exists within a non-dual frame". My understanding of the world (based upon the concepts of Sikhi) influences the way I engage with the social work classroom. For example, the concept of non-duality within the Sikhi tradition acknowledges "binary thinking" which "can be characterized as necessary evils". According to Gurnam Singh (2024), it is the recognition and acceptance of necessary evils in the real world that allows one to "transcend into unity". In my research, I point to the binaries of White and Racialized students as a reality of social work education and practice. This duality is constitutive of the social experience of space in the society I live in. As I pondered the concept of non-duality, I wondered if these dualities could be transformed to a position of unity within the classroom.

In addition, the principles of non-duality and that no one person may have ownership of the truth lend themselves well to the creation of a safe ethical space in the social work classroom, in which a diversity of worldviews, genders, religions, and relations to place exist simultaneously. The Sikhi understanding of truth beckons to the concept of ethical space. Within this space, we consider each other's truth and how these truths relate. Within this space, we work together to create a collective ideology that includes these truths. As I contemplated the concepts of unity and truth, I recognized the importance of crafting a safe and ethical space for all social work students. The inclusion of all within the social work classroom is essential as it provides an avenue for recognizing each other's truths and moving beyond dualistic thinking.

As a child, the experience of being in the Sangat instilled in me a sense of tranquility, wonder, acceptance, and enlightenment. I was taught that in order to be part of a Sangat, you have to have an open heart and mind, as well as treating everyone as your equal. There was an understanding that the common goal was for the betterment of all. In this way, from my earliest years, I learned that in order to achieve Sangat, the space must be free from inequality, judgment, and oppression. The teachings of the Sikh Gurus on the Sangat are very informative about creating a safe ethical space. Guru Nanak's teaching, for example, focused on creating equality for all people, and thus on the empowerment of those oppressed in our society to be able to live a life of respect and dignity (Singh, 2019, p. 20):

> Guru Nanak emphasized and promoted collective worship and healthy relations between people, as a response to the ascetic ideals at the time. Through collective worship, the seekers would assist one another in spiritual progress and implement the guru's teachings on equality rather than categorizing and dividing each other on basis of caste, religion, profession, and so on. By sitting down together to eat, pray, or discuss, one would come closer to humanity and eventually closer to God (Jacobsen & Myrvo, 2012, p.20-21).

When the Sangat was created, there was a great deal of inequality among and between people. To combat this inequality, Guru Nanak founded the Sangat. The root word 'sang' (in the Sikh words, 'Sangat' or 'Sanggat') means association, or to accompany travelers on a pilgrimage. The word 'Sadh' [which often presupposes the word 'Sangat' (i.e., Sadh Sangat)] is associated with religious companions (Khalsa, 2016; p.1). Thus, for the Sikh, the 'Sadh Sangat' refers to all people sitting together to eat and pray (or to 'associate with religious companions'). Social standing was not of significance. When sitting together, whether rich or poor, all were equal (*All about Sikhs*, n.d). Within the Sangat, the importance of equality is recognized to this day.

Also important within the Sangat is the opportunity to feel a great change in oneself and help reduce egoism, angularities, and eccentricities. Within the Sangat, a person learns to work cooperatively and democratically. By doing this, one's sense of selfishness vanishes (*All about Sikhs*, n.d). This focus away from the self, Sethi (2010) states, "… is meant to uplift and purify one's mind, soul, and body, provide a peaceful experience, and espouse the value of community and social welfare" (p.1).

As Sikh society developed, the responsibilities of the Sangat increased, as did its role in the Sikh community.

> The expression of service and a belief in the unreality of caste and class distinction is but an extension of the earliest teachings of the Sikh gurus.... A communion ceremony was specially designed to encourage an outlook of equality among all in the faith. It is a symbol of Sikh recognition of equality among all people, to whatever caste, creed, colour, nationality, or religion they may belong. It also helps the Sikhs to put into practice the spirit of social service. (*All about Sikhs*, n.d)

## 2.10 Conclusion

I am a Sikh Punjabi woman. Furthermore, I am a second-generation immigrant woman who continues to be racialized by modern Western society. This positionality

shapes my insight into the experience of students in my, and other, social work classrooms. My lived experience of racialization as a student and educator helps my understanding of the racial structures which necessitate, and complicate, the creation of a safe space. I understand the complex and contradictory nature of racialization and racism. I also understand how difficult it is to identify and name these structures and processes. Given the indignity and shame experienced by victims of racism, I do not find it surprising that racialized people are hesitant to speak their truth.

Although I have experienced oppression as a result of my social location, I am aware that my experience does not encompass all of the forms of oppression which racialized students face. I am aware that as a cis-gendered, able-bodied woman, my experiences are likely to be different from the experiences of those who are not privileged in those ways. For example, my name, in Punjabi, can be used for either gender. Many times, people have assumed that I am male because of my name. This mistaken expectation does not cause me discomfort because I have the privilege of being cis-gendered. I am aware that others may experience ongoing oppression as a result of their gender being misidentified. This is true for many other oppressions which students face.

As I have stated, I was born and raised in a Western society and am therefore inured to colonial ways of living. I am aware that I have been part of the colonial system and thus have an ethical obligation to decolonize my practice. Throughout my upbringing, my parents stressed the importance of a post-secondary education; universities were favoured by my extended family's perspective. However, this positive attitude has often overlooked the abuse, atrocities and genocide which educational institutions have committed against Indigenous peoples. I do not believe that I will ever fully appreciate the oppression experienced by Indigenous people; however, I strive to better my understanding through commitment to reflective practice.

Reviewing literature concerning social work education, diversity and inclusion, safe space, ethical space, and Sangat both enriched and complicated my research question: "How to craft a safe ethical space in the social work classroom". It raised questions of whether a safe space is attainable, or if the concept of safe space should be replaced by other "space" typologies. By exploring the topics of social work, diversity, and inclusion, I recognized a need for the revitalization of the anti-racist framework and for

inclusivity to be raised to a position of prominence. My exploration of Sangat principles inspired the architecture with which craft a safe, ethical, and collective space for social work students. The collective nature of the Sangat, I believe, ensures respect for diversity and differing viewpoints. I found validation for this in the arguments for the equality of worldviews when crafting an ethical space.

Although the literature I reviewed related to my question, I was unable to locate any studies which considered the perspectives of both student and teacher concurrently. This fueled my desire to include both of these in seeking answers to my question. I decided to retain the term “safe space” as a change in name would shift the focus away from students feeling unsafe in the classroom, which was a central motivation for my research. I saw a potential change in classroom typology as akin to the “politically correct” transformation of the “East Indian” ethnic identity to “South Asian”. Despite this new moniker, the racism experienced by (South) East Indians (Asians) has not changed. For this reason, I felt it important to retain the term “safe” in my study.

# 3 Methodology and Design

## 3.1 Methodology

There are three main methodologies utilized in the research study. I felt it was important for the study to have a qualitative design using autoethnography, narrative inquire and practitioner inquiry methodologies. When I first started to think about this research, I knew that autoethnography would be one aspect of my study as I wanted to further understand my experiences and how they related to the research. I added the narrative inquiry as a way to add the voices of my participants in the study. The voices of the participants helped shape the practitioner inquiry component of the research. In addition to the general ethical guidelines for research with human subjects, TCPS2, my ethical approach was influenced by Indigenous research ethics, Sikh ethics, and the Canadian Association of Social Work Code of Ethics.

### 3.1.1 Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology which is used across disciplines and has found great value in the field of social work (Wells, 2011). According to Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) narrative inquiry is the study of stories, narratives or descriptions of series of events that accounts for human experience. (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Through this study, narrative inquiry reconstructs a person's experience in relation to the other and the social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry does not adhere to a singular approach; rather, there is variation in the way the researchers choose stories and methods used to interpret the stories (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Regardless of method, it is important to note the relationship of the researcher and participants as an important piece of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

While reading about narrative inquiry, I came across Jeong-Hee Kim's book, *Understanding Narrative Inquiry: The Crafting and Analysis of Stories as Research* (2016). Of interest to me was Kim's comment, "I found myself falling in love with narrative inquiry and decided to use it for my dissertation research although I did not have my dissertation topic yet" (p. 2) As a social worker, I can understand his love for narrative inquiry. In practice, I find my clinical work to be strongly influenced by

narrative inquiry, as everyone has a story to tell. Working in the Mental Health field, I listen to the stories of children and their parents as they try to make sense of their mental health issues. I love the inclusivity of narrative inquiry as it highlights the power of people's stories. However, I was not as confident as Kim with using narrative inquiry as I worried about how I would ensure the voices of my participants were presented true to their meaning.

> The idea of working within three-dimensional narrative inquiry space highlights the relational dimension of narrative inquiry. Narrative inquirers cannot bracket themselves out of the inquiry but rather need to find ways to inquire into participant experiences, their own experiences as well as the constructed experiences developed through the relational inquiry process (Clandinin, 2006, p.47).

As I applied this methodology, I found Clandinin's insight to be true. Indeed, the rapport I created with the participants was an important piece of the inquiry as it allowed them to tell their stories. Furthermore, prior to conducting interviews I engaged in reflection in order to ensure that I was in the space to listen with the intention of learning from my participants and not for the purpose of "proving any conclusions." During these interviews and circles, I found the necessary comfort to discover the learnings and also construct the meanings of these learnings.

One of the other reasons I was interested in using narrative inquiry was because of Margaret Kovach's (2009) story work. "Narrative is culturally framed so that it is important to acknowledge at the outset that much current knowledge of narrative is based on the Western tradition" (Wells, K, 2011, p. 5). For this reason, I was interested in looking at narrative through a culturally informed lens. By taking guidance from Kovach's Indigenous lens, I was able to look at story work from an anti-oppressive and culturally inclusive perspective. According to Kovach (2009), "there are two general forms of stories. …There are stories that hold mythical elements, such as creation and teaching stories, and there are personal narratives of place, happenings, and experiences as the kokoms and mosoms (Aunties and uncles) experienced them and passed along to the next generation through oral tradition" (p. 95).

My research is more related to Kovach's latter description of personal narratives. I wanted to have the students and Sangat tell their stories and experiences of being in the social work classroom and Sangat. These stories were important as

they were factual and contained important lessons. Another teaching that stayed in my mind was Kovach's (2009) warning that "story, as method, is used differently from culture to culture, and so its application falters without full appreciation of the underlying epistemological assumptions that motivate its use" (p. 97). This was important for me to consider as my participants were coming from different cultures and worldviews. There definitely was a difference in how the stories and experiences were told by each participant depending on their worldviews and ways of being. For example, some students were quite succinct when answering open-ended questions and presented their stories in a very chronological order. Other students presented their answers through examples and stories, while others would start abstractly before arriving at their main point.

### 3.1.2 Autoethnography

I wanted to be able to explore my own experiences in the classroom and the Sangat and therefore chose to include autoethnography in my research study. "Autoethnography requires the researcher to gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience, then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739, cited in Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008, p. 348). Bochner (2000) adds that auto-ethnographical methodology allows one to "extract meaning from experience rather than depict experience exactly as it was lived" (p.270; cited in Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008, p. 375). Upon reflection, I found that the meanings behind many of my experiences as a student were similar to the experiences of the students in my study. This process allowed me to understand what I learned from the experience rather than just remembering the events. Many times, it is easy to remember how things happened but then never take the time to reflect on how these events influenced our lives. The reflexivity of extracting meaning from experience not only helped me understand my experiences, it also helped me understand the experiences of the students. Furthermore, as mentioned by Jensen-Hart and Williams (2010), autoethnographic methodology functions as a "way of accessing knowledge within inter-subjective realities" which "simultaneously, generates a form of critical reflection" (p. 45).

"As method autoethnography combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p.273). Employing autoethnography necessitates reflecting on participants' experiences in order to help build understanding and further knowledge (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). As such, I employed authoethnography in order to explore my past education and teaching experiences in order to help others better understand the experience of racialized people in the social work classroom. "When researcher do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p.276). With this in mind, I used specific stories that I felt were relevant to the research. I then compared and contrasted my experiences with those of the students and members of the Sangat.

Initially using this approach stirred some uncertainties in my mind. My main concern was that I did not want the sole focus of study to be about my journey. Although I knew my learnings would be a necessary dimension of the research, I did not want my learnings to take away from the stories of the participants. These concerns have been addressed by Tomaselli, Dyll and Francis (2008), who warn that "the use of an auto-ethnographical approach must serve to accomplish more than self-absolution in a form of neo-analytic therapy, an unwarranted self-indulgence" (cited in Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008, p. 360). As I went through this process, I kept the advice of Holman Jones (2008) in mind, that auto-ethnography is "a balancing act as it works to hold self and culture together…" (cited in Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008, p. 360).

My research is not only about me; it extends to social work students and teachers who will be working together in the classroom. My research is also about the lives of people who these future social workers will come into contact with. In this way my research is about our larger classroom, the world. As such, the use of an autoethnographic perspective, "a way of seeing and being [that] challenges, contests, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other" (Denzin, 2006, p.422), fits well with social work ideology as it increases empathy and connection with others, illuminates unseen aspects of self and social relationships, and blurs boundaries between research and practice (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010, p.45).

### 3.1.3 Practitioner Inquiry

Practitioner Inquiry, which "encompasses theoretical approaches for conducting and documenting research as well as practices for gathering and analyzing data" (Nordstrom, 2015, p.90), was also used in this research. Nordstrom (2015, p.90) states that "practitioner inquiry encompasses theoretical approaches for conducting and documenting research as well as practices for gathering and analyzing data. It emphasizes the role of practice in the research, accounts for epistemological stance in approach to research and research subject and provides a framework for presenting and analyzing the data." Cochran-Smith, Barnett, Friedman, and Pine (2009) state that through "practitioner inquiry, the systematic examination and analysis of students' learning (or other educational outcomes and issues) are often interwoven with examination of practitioner's intentions, reactions, decisions, and interpretations." (p 19) They add that practitioner inquiry "makes it possible for practitioner-researchers to produce richly detailed and unusually insightful analyses of teaching and learning from the inside" (Cochran-Smith, Barnett, Friedman, and Pine, 2009, p.19).

Hall and Wall (2015) state that practitioner inquiry is associated with action-orientated research. As Strier (2007, p.860) explains, "action-orientated research is designed as a cyclical process of experiential learning and action, committed to the production of knowledge that is useful for improving the lives of the research subjects." Extrapolating further on the nation of action-orientated research, Boog (2003, p.426) states that it is "designed to improve the research subjects' capacities to solve problems, develop skills (including professional skills), increase their chances of self-determination, and have more influence on the functioning and decision-making processes of organizations and institutions from the context in which they act." Although my research does seek to bring about change by directly involving my students in the inquiry, the study does not empower students to make changes through their own agency. Rather, I assume that utilization of my practical knowledge along with the knowledge of my students better helps to cultivate a safe and ethical space in the social work classroom. Furthermore, I assume that this combined knowledge may help other instructors do the same. Thus, my research is oriented towards practitioner inquiry, albeit without all of the qualities needed to be recognized as action-orientated inquiry.

Brydon-Miller and Maguire (2009, p. 83) state:

> Some forms of practitioner inquiry take a narrow focus on improving classroom practice or on deepening the individual's understanding of her or his own experience as a teacher. Such forms of research are extremely important and intersect with the more collaborative approach of PAR (Participatory Action Research) by giving teachers and other educational practitioners a framework for locating themselves as researchers, for understanding education.

In keeping with Brydon-Miller and Maguire's (2009) supposition, my research assumes a collaborative approach by including students and Sangat members as holders of knowledge relevant to bringing about change. By adopting practitioner inquiry, I was able to understand barriers to safe and ethical space through their perspective. As I was resolute in my decision to avoid a hierarchical approach in my research, the strong emphasis on collaboration which practitioner inquiry espoused resonated with me. As stated by Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Friedman, and Pine (2009), collaboration is a key feature of practitioner inquiry, as it is evident that those in the particular contexts have significant knowledge of the problem, questions, and solutions. This aspect of practitioner inquiry is important for my research, as it is the knowledge of the problem, questions and solutions of the participants which enable them to influence the creation of a safe space.

That practitioner inquiry "generates local knowledge by considering multiple perspectives and rethinking previous knowledge" (Cochran-Smith & Demers, 2010, p.26) by allowing the researcher to work from an inquiry stance also resonated with me. The data I obtained through my research challenged the way that I thought about my knowledge and experience of the Sangat and classroom and enabled me to bring different local perspectives into my study of safe space. Furthermore, I believe that my research prompted students and Sangat members to consider others' thoughts of space, as well as examine their own. This collective reflection and collaboration encouraged the integration and formulation of new knowledge. As stated by Cochran-Smith and Demers (2010, p.26), adopting a stance of practitioner inquiry helped to "conceptualize learning outcomes for the students in rich and complex ways".

Despite the unique, encompassing, and collaborative approach which practitioner inquiry affords, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2007, p. 40) caution that the practice of practitioner inquiry can be tricky as it can, ""challenge many aspects of

university culture and carries with it multiple—and tricky—ethical dilemmas." Cognizant of this caveat, I felt some degree of intimidation conducting this study at the institution in which I was employed. I was aware that blurring the boundaries or researcher and educator could be tricky yet beneficial. However, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2007) assert, "practitioner inquiry helps us inquire about how knowledge is constructed and used in the university setting." Moreover, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2007) point out that although, "we may resolve all the ethical tensions and dilemnas" ... "the beauty of inquiry is that is allows us to continue to be curious and challenge our assumptions" (p. 40).

## 3.2 Research Design

My research was organized in four different phases conducted over a one-year span. These four phases were: engaging in dialogue with members of the Kamloops Gurudwara Sangat and with TRU social work students (Phase 1: beginning of May to August, 2018); synthesizing and reflecting on what I learned from these dialogues (Phase 2: June to August, 2018); applying the learnings from Phase 2 to the Social Work classroom (Phase 3: September to December 2018); and, finally, engaging in dialogue with students who experienced this altered learning environment (Phase 4, December 2018 to April 2019). Phases 1 and 2 overlapped because I started to transcribe the data right after each interview to be ready for analyzing once the last interview was completed.

### 3.2.1 Phase 1

In the first phase I conducted interviews with Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students from TRU and members of the Kamloops Gurudwara Sahib Society. The interviews were intended to elicit participants' narratives of their personal experiences of space in the classroom and the Sangat. Interviews with TRU students were held in locations chosen by the participants. These interviews were one-to-one interviews with the researcher. The interviews with the Sangat consisted of two group circles, with participants in each group choosing where to meet. One circle was held at the Gurudwara, while the other was held at the home of one of the participants. Interviews with BSW students were structured around open-ended questions regarding their

experience in the social work classroom, safe space and how to craft a safe space. The circles with the Sangat likewise consisted in conversations prompted by open-ended questions in regards to what the Sangat meant to the participants, the experiences they had had being part of the Sangat, and whether the Sangat might be said to create a safe space for them.

### 3.2.2 Phase 2

In the second phase of the research, my goal was to synthesize and reflect on the teachings in the interviews and then apply these learnings in two Social Work classrooms. Having transcribed the interviews of the BSW students and the Sangat members, I used narrative inquiry analysis to help uncover and clarify what those interviews had to teach me. The narrative inquiry analysis will be discussed further in the data analysis section below. From the analysis, I was able to find some key learnings that I applied to the classroom. I spent a great deal of time thinking about these learnings and envisioning their application in the social work classroom. I discuss this process in more detail at the start of Chapter 6.

### 3.2.3 Phase 3

In the third phase of the research, I applied the learnings to two social work classrooms at TRU, Social Work and Mental Health and Social Work Groups. At the beginning of these classes, I informed the students of my research and acknowledged that I would be trying to apply the learnings from the interviews over the course of the term. I also informed the students that they would be given the opportunity to take part in an end of semester discussion if they wished to contribute to the research. I did not go into details of the learnings that I would apply, as I did not want to influence the participants. I also kept a journal of my experiences with this application of learnings in the social work classroom.

### 3.2.4 Phase 4

At the end of the semester, I asked my students if they would like to participate in the research. I had students volunteer from both classes. The students were given a choice of one-to-one interviews or circles. All of the students chose the option of

having a group circle. I conducted two circles, one in each class at the end of the semester. The interviews were held in the classrooms at the students' request. The goal of these discussions was to gain insight into the students' experience in the classroom, especially in terms of safety, and whether they were able to be their whole selves. The interviews were then transcribed for data analysis.

### 3.2.5 Required Organizational Permission and Approval

I applied for ethics approval from Simon Fraser University and was granted a one-year approval. I subsequently renewed this approval annually. In addition, in order to conduct research at TRU and Kamloops Gurudwara Sahib Society, it was important for me to get formal approval from these institutions and ensure that I follow their ethical protocols.

At TRU, I sent my research proposal to the Social Work department, Dean and Chair in order for them to review the study and provide any feedback. I also sent my study poster to the Indigenous scholars requesting that they provide feedback. I received encouragement to complete this research from the Chair and Faculty members. I applied for ethics approval through TRU and was given a one-year approval to conduct the actual research at TRU.

In terms of my research at the Gurudwara, I first discussed my research with some of the elders at the temple to get their approval. I then forwarded my study poster to the Kamloops Gurudwara Sahib Society President so that he could discuss my research with the committee. Subsequently the president orally advised that they had given approval for the study with the Sikh Gurudwara Sahib members.

### 3.2.6 Participants/Recruitment/Sampling Methods

For the first phase of my research, I had two different populations. In order to obtain a sample that could provide good insights into my research questions, I utilized a purposeful sampling method. Suri (2011) states that "purposeful sampling strategies might be particularly suited to constructing multiperspectival, emancipatory, participatory and deconstructive interpretations of published research" (p. 63). My aim was to get a diverse sample for my interviews.

Not wanting to influence the participants in my research, I avoided direct recruitment of students and Sangat members. I emailed the Dean and Chair of the TRU Social Work department informing them of the purpose and design of my study. The Dean in turn forwarded my letter and recruitment poster to the Chair of Social Work. The BSW Chair forwarded the email to the rest of the faculty who then forwarded the study poster to students in their classes. One of the BSW students posted the study poster on the BSW Social Work Facebook page. From the Facebook page, some students were able to contact me in order to take part in the study. Also, several students whom I had interacted with in the past volunteered to participate in the study. In addition to these means of recruitment, because I was including Indigenous students in the sample, I made an effort to engage Aboriginal colleagues and fellow professionals to help recruit participants and ensure cultural sensitivity in collection and interpretation of data. I reached out to the Indigenous BSW faculty and asked for their assistance in forwarding the Poster to potential students. I also forwarded the study poster to Indigenous Social Workers at the Indigenous agencies in Kamloops.

This first population of research participants consisted of students who are, or had been, enrolled in the BSW at TRU within the past five years. It was important for me to get a diverse sample including gender, race, and sexual orientation. For my interviews in phase 1, I had 9 students take part in the interviews. Three of the students identified as Aboriginal, three of the students identified as being racialized and three students identified as being White. Of the nine students, one identified as being gay, two identified as having an invisible disability. Eight of the students identified as being women and one identified as being male.

To recruit participants from the Kamloops Gurudwara Sahib Society, I followed Sikh protocol. I first approached the temple elders, including my parents, and informed them of the intent of my research. I also contacted the President of the Kamloops Gurudwara Sahib society who then discussed it with the committee. Once I was given permission to go ahead with the study, I put up some posters at the Gurudwara and some of the Gurudwara members advised each other of the study. As a member of the Kamloops Gurudwara Sahib Society, I knew most of the Sangat members who volunteered to participate in the study. Once, I had obtained enough participants I was able to organize two different circles for the interviews. One circle consisted of seven

Sikh women with age ranging from 19- 35 years old. The second group consisted of 3 Sikh men and 2 Sikh women between 65-77 years old.

For the final phase of my study, I interviewed two groups of BSW students who volunteered to participate in a talking circle at the end of the course. One group was from the Mental Health class and the other from the Groups Class. There were 16 students in total. There was some diversity among the students in both classes. Of the 16 students, three identified as being racialized, two identified as being Metis, 4 students identified as male and 12 identified as being female, and 4 identified as having invisible disabilities.

### 3.2.7 Obtaining Consent/Assent

To obtain consent, I met with the TRU BSW students and members of the Sangat who expressed a desire to participate in my study. I had the volunteers sign a consent form outlining the risks, benefits, and voluntary nature of participating in the study. The participants were advised that they could withdraw from, and/or choose to revoke information they had given during the study at any time without penalty. This signed informed consent form was valid for 6 months at the date of signing. Since I am a TRU BSW sessional instructor, I ensured that participants were aware that their participation would have no implications for how I evaluated their performance in the classroom. Participation was voluntary. Students were not coerced to participate and there were no expectations regarding participation placed on them. There were no consequences for those who did not wish to participate. Students who engaged in the talking circles in Phase 4 signed an additional consent form. Participants were made aware that the confidentiality of their responses could not be completely guaranteed, as other participants in the circle might choose to share their responses outside the circle.

### 3.2.8 Participant Confidentiality

In addition to verbal assurance of confidentiality, participants were informed via a formal letter that their names would not be used in the research. Participants' information was coded to make individuals non-identifiable, and stored in a locked cabinet which is accessible to me. This information is not subject to unauthorized access, use, disclosure, modification, loss, or theft. The audio data was destroyed after

2 years, while the transcripts were kept until the dissertation was completed and will be destroyed following the defence.

### 3.2.9 Data Analysis

Josselson (2006) emphasizes that narrative research is “always interpretive at every stage” (Kim, 2016, p. 4), from conceptualization of research to data collection to writing a research text. I concur as I found myself involved in interpretation throughout the research, especially during data collection and onward. By reading about narrative inquiry, I came to understand that there is a wide range of methods for analysis of data (Riessman, 2000; May, 2012). This I found refreshing as I did not believe a “cookie cutter” method would do the data justice. Kovach discusses “the use of interpretive and analytical approaches in qualitative research in order to find meaning from the insights” (p. 130). However, she cautions that the “more conventional analysis of research is a reductive way of knowing, and contrasts with Indigenous epistemologies that are nonfragmentary and holistic” (p. 130). This was something I kept in mind while engaged in data analysis. I did not want to try to fit the data into a certain type of analysis. I wanted the data to guide me in the finding the right way to conduct the analysis.

Over the past 20 years, I have used a narrative approach when conducting mental health assessments. This practice has helped me develop the skills needed to elicit, and actively listen to, the stories of others. Furthermore, I have become adept at observing, and making note of, the nonverbal behaviors individuals demonstrate when they tell their stories. These skills have enabled me to understand the implicit meaning the stories that people tell. This long practice of listening and interpretation stood me in good stead as I embarked on the process of transforming the raw data into a representation of students' experiences and perspectives, and of the shared and situated understanding among the Sangat members.

I transcribed the interviews myself, which was a great process as it allowed me to listen to the participants over and over again. I found that listening to the interviews at a later time helped me learn even more. During the interview process, I found myself listening intently, but I was cognizant of my other responsibilities during the interview. However, when listening to the interviews later, I found myself listening just for the

purpose of understanding without having to worry about the interview process itself. I ended up listening to the interviews several times as I transcribed the interviews word by word. After the long process of transcribing the interviews, I found that I had memorized many things the participants said in the interviews. I found this very rewarding, as I was able to reflect further on the interviews at times when I least expected it. For example, many times I found that I would be having a conversation at work or be teaching a class and something would relate to what one of the participants had said, and I would find myself reflecting on its meaning. After the interviews were transcribed, I also read the transcribed interviews several times. This was another valuable exercise as I had previously understood the data through verbal/oral comprehension, but, after reading the data, I had the opportunity to understand the data visually and analytically. Again, this added more insight to understanding the meaning of what the participants were trying to convey.

For the second phase of my research, it was important for me to analyze the first set of interviews and synthesize the findings so that I could apply the teachings to the classroom for the action-oriented portion of my research. I chose to manually code my data as I felt I had spent a great deal of time with the data in the transcription and reflection phase. After I had completed the last phase of the research, I went back and analyzed all my data using NVivo software for data analysis. Even though this prolonged the time spent on analysis, I found that my manual data analysis and software analysis gave me the same results. This helped to ensure that my analysis was both vigorous and reliable.

After transcribing the interviews and reviewing the obtained data, I decided to employ cross-sectional thematic analysis. Specifically, to analyze the data, I drew upon Polkinghorne's pragmatic narrative analysis which involves inspecting stories to inductively draw out themes and concepts. Moreover, Polkinghorne's pragmatic analysis attends to categories of themes while paying attention to the relationships which exist between themes (Polkinghorne, 1995). This focus allows researchers to "uncover(s) commonalities that exist across the multiple sources of data" and "aim(s) to produce general knowledge from a set of evidence or particulars found in a collection of stories" (Polkinghorne, 1995). Hence, Polkinghorne's pragmatic analysis "underplays the unique aspects of each story" (Kim, 2016, p. 196-197), an approach that suited my purposes as a practitioner looking to draw pedagogical guidance from the data. By

asking open-ended questions during interviews, I encouraged the participants to share their narratives rather then simply respond to my questions. As such, it was important that I was open and sensitive to honouring the participants' own understanding of their experience as I analyzed transcripts, rather than approaching them with my own preconceived expectations or interpretation.

I applied codes as I went through each interview. If the data did not "fit" into an existing code, I would create a new one to ensure that all of the meanings were captured. After applying all the codes, I looked for patterns between the sets of interviews. Of note, each phase of data was analyzed separately; for example, I did not compare Phase 1 data with Phase 4 data. This was intentional given the differences in purpose of the data. From the codes emerged definite patterns, leading to the identification of prominent themes. I then performed a cross-sectional analysis of the themes in order to better understand the data. By applying attributes to the themes, and then exploring themes with different attributes, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the themes.

Data obtained through interviews with the Sangat members and BSW students were analyzed separately. Striking to me were their differing perceptions of safety and ethical space. Sangat members spoke of equality, peacefulness, community, helping, and spirituality when describing the collective space of the Sangat. When speaking of the classroom, BSW students were less succinct and less similar in their descriptions. Did these differences reflect different ideologies or cultural understandings of space? In the collective conversations among the Sangat members, participants seemed to use a more collective language. Comparing the findings from these different contexts helped me recognize teachings that I could apply to the classroom, as well as teachings that were beyond me, as a professor, to implement. This will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

## 3.3 Limitations of the Chosen Methodologies

The use of three methodologies allowed for a robust methodological design, in which my own experiences could be cross-checked against other people's narratives, and my interpretations tested through changes in classroom practice. However, inherent in every study are its limitations.

First, as a relatively small qualitative study, this research could not make strong claims about social work education in general. Furthermore, in so far as it was shaped by my own positionality and worldview, it could not be undertaken in exactly the same way by other researchers. Nonetheless, I believe that the insights it provides into student experiences in the social work classroom, and the example it offers of research designed to help craft a safe space in such classrooms, can be of value to other social work instructors and in the design of social work programs.

Through use of autoethnography, I became more aware of my sensitivity to racism. Though I tried to be stringent in my bias-checking, it is possible that my results were influenced by my sensitivity. On the positive side, this methodology enabled me to be more authentic in how I engaged in the research and to disclose more of my truth to the reader.

In the first and fourth phases of my research, Sangat members and BSW students respectively engaged in circle discussion. Although the participants requested this arrangement in both cases, it is possible that some members felt less inclined to voice their objections when sitting amongst their peers. It is also possible that the overall positive atmosphere of these discussions influenced participants' feelings and perceptions regarding their own experiences.

Finally, the use of purposeful sampling can create bias. In this study, the participants were recruited from the Kamloops Gurudwara Sahib Society and Thompson Rivers University. Though no participant was turned away, no positive measures were taken to ensure that these were representative samples, and indeed with such small numbers this would not have had strong statistical validity in any case, Thus it is possible that the experiences of these participants are different from other Gurudwara members or university social work students. However, the most important requirement was that participants be able to speak to the study questions on the basis of their personal knowledge, from a diversity of positions, and this criterion was met.

# 4 BSW Student Teachings

## 4.1 Introduction

Phase 1 interviews were held with social work students who had either completed their BSW at TRU in the past 5 years or were in the process of completing their degree. The goal of the interviews was to discuss how to craft a safe ethical space in the social work classroom. As safety can be interpreted in many ways, in this study, students were asked to see safety as the "ability to be your whole self" in the classroom. As previously mentioned, data analysis led to the identification of some main themes. Each of these themes will be presented in this chapter.

## 4.2 TRU Social Work Program and Students

Typically, students accepted in the Social Work BSW program at TRU first complete two years of undergraduate courses. The latter two years of the Social Work BSW program consist of a variety of mandatory and elective social work courses. Students must also complete two field practicums during these years in a social work placement. Most courses in the social work program have 30 students; however, some practice courses such as Social Work and Groups, Interviewing, and Working with

Diverse People, have smaller class sizes of about 20 students. These classes are conducted in the Arts and Education or Old Main buildings at TRU. Typically, there are more women than men enrolled in the social work program.

During this study, the majority of the participating students were White women, predominantly in their 20's to 30's. They included three Indigenous women, one male and one female Indo-Canadian student, one Black student, and three female White students. Of the nine students, one identified as being gay, and one identified as having an invisible disability. All students were, or had been, enrolled in the Social Work BSW program at TRU. They are identified here using pseudonyms.

## 4.3 Students' View of Safety

Throughout the interviews, I observed a difference in how students discussed the topic of safety. Data analysis confirmed my observation. White students responded to safety differently than the Racialized and Indigenous students. White students felt "safe" and except for maybe one class, they were able to be their whole selves. *"I never felt unsafe around other students and, I hate to say it but, I feel I may have made other people feel unsafe"* (Tracy). The same participant mentioned: *"Generally walking into any* situation*, I think in some ways if felt safer than other students because of age and experience and I paid to be here and belong here* " (Tracy). When asked about being able to be their own self, another White student stated, "*The majority of the time, I am. Mind you, that is just who I am. I don't really care…. I will say anything, or talk about anything. If you don't like it, I don't care, this is who I am"* (Joye). This student said that there was only one instructor that made her feel unsafe in the classroom. *"The only times I held out was when I did not feel safe. That was only one class and one prof"* (Joye).

One of the White students asked me if I would be interviewing a diverse population, as she believed someone from a diverse racial background may view safety differently. I found that very insightful and true in this particular study. The White students conveyed feeling safe, for the most part, in expressing their whole self in the classroom. For them, the main barrier was not feeling respected by the professor due to personality differences.

When discussing feelings of safety with Indigenous and racialized students, they did not have such bold assertions about being safe. As one Indigenous student mentioned, she would have to assess safety in each class. *"That is how I am navigating the BSW, because I understood what the safe place should look like, I knew within the first couple of classes that this was a safe space or not and then kind of adjusted myself to fit within in that location"* (Gina). One of the racialized students stated that it was not until he was in the MSW program that he understood that he did not feel "safe" at times in the BSW program. *"Even then, I felt uncomfortable but I don't think I would have used the word unsafe. I think it was after all these topics were talked about in the MSW program as I read up on my own interest that I realized what a feeling of unsafety is. It's like I don't want to talk to these people anymore, I don't feel safe talking about my opinion, and all that kind of stuff"* (Josh). I felt that I was able to relate to this student, as it was not until my doctoral studies that I experienced being safe enough to express my true self.

It was interesting that the racialized and Indigenous students all responded to feeling unsafe by either sitting in the back of the classroom or remaining silent. Reflecting on my experience as a BSW student in the same program, I remember using the same defence mechanisms. I would sit in the back of the class or when that was not possible remain silent in the class. Often, my silence was misinterpreted as a lack of involvement. I recall a group class consisting of all White students and a White professor that I had taken as a BSW student at TRU. Class discussions would involve us sitting in a circle. I did not feel safe in this class and, as such, would listen actively but would not engage in discussion. During one class, the professor singled me out and told me that I needed to vocalize more in class. I felt humiliated. I remember thinking that the professor did not understand his privilege or the privilege of others in the classroom. Although I spoke to my friends about this experience, I did not feel confident enough to confront my professor. Now, I see that it was not lack of confidence but lack of privilege.

## 4.4 Professors Play a Crucial Role in Creating Safety

All the participants were adamant that the professor/instructor played a crucial role in creating a safe space. In fact, most of the students felt the professors played the

main role in creating safety for them in the classroom. *"Instructors make a huge difference."* (Lisa). *"It has a lot to do with the instructors. Some of them, their presence just creates a feeling of safety and acceptance and then there are others who have more masculine or authoritarian traits."* (Wanda). *"Again, I am going to go back to who is holding that space – going back to the instructor/professor."* (Gina). Being an instructor at the University for the past 16 years, I did not find this to be surprising; however, I was very curious to hear how the students felt the professors constructed safety or, perhaps, failed to craft a safe environment. The main themes identified were diversity of faculty, inclusion of diversity, handling of conflict by professors, and the professors' attitudes towards students.

## A. Diversity of Faculty

All but one of the Indigenous and racialized students said that having a diverse faculty helped them be their whole selves in the classroom. In contrast, White students did not express the same need for diversity of faculty to feel safe. I caution that White faculty did not make students feel unsafe. In fact, most students felt that social work faculty made them feel safe. "*I would say that the majority of them made the classrooms very safe."* (Joye). However, most of the racialized and Indigenous participants felt that they were able to be their whole selves in class when the instructor came from a diverse background. *"Yeah, I think diversity in the faculty is very important. I would be less keen to speak in the classroom if the social work instructor does not have that lived experience."* (Josh). "*Yeah, now that I think about it, it depends on the professor, I felt more comfortable with racialized professors as well as with women professors… my racialized instructors because they were so open to speaking about it and challenging different things. I think that… it was definitely my third and fourth year that I would have felt that."* (Jenny). This participant mentioned feeling more at ease having an instructor from a diverse background.

If that was not possible, the participants appreciated sitting beside someone from a diverse background. *"It was interesting for me when the instructor came from a diverse group like if they were racialized or LGBTQ community or even if they were a woman. I felt a little more comfortable and even if I was in… or the person beside me was so like racialized… that felt comfortable for me."* (Josh). Another participant

observed that the two classes in which she felt safe to be her whole self , and in which she talked the most, were led by racialized faculty. *"Yeah, I know for sure, the two instructors I referred to… neither of them had a White background. And the one classroom that I was in that didn't really feel good, she was White. I don't know if it made a difference. It may have been her personality."* (Mary). Additionally, a racialized student felt that racialized instructors made her feel safer because they would pick up on how the minority students might have been feeling in the classroom. *"Do the instructors talk about spaces and other minority students? I was the only black girl and it would be great if instructors were mindful of minority students and those spaces. I find racialized professors pick up on those things, but, many times, others wouldn't."* (Jenny).

The same students indicated that when the program itself teaches about diversity, it is important to have a diverse faculty. *"I think, especially in social work, teaching is anti-oppressive and, um, about inclusion and acceptance of diversity. I think having a diverse faculty is important. I think having that person leading that classroom makes it feel like a safer space." (*Josh). *"Exactly, that's the thing with social work. Having more racialized professors is so important for having more diversity in the program."* (Jenny). One of the racialized students did not have an opportunity to have a racialized instructor. The student mentioned how this would have made her feel safer in the program*. "I think having a teacher that looks like me… like an Indian teacher that looked like me and knew my experiences. And even having someone that I knew may have the same experiences as me.*" (Sandi). I could relate to this student's comments. Although I completed the BSW long before these participants, and many things have changed since then, I felt the same way about my experience in the BSW program. I have always thought that it would have been nice to have someone from a similar background teaching some of the classes as it would have helped me to hear how someone from a similar worldview navigated the systems and applied their worldview to practice.

If the professor did not come from a diverse background then students appreciated having guest speakers who could add diversity and bring the lived experience into the classroom*. "I just like the openness of the different types of expression in your learning… presentations, sharing of knowledge, guest speakers and things like that."* (Josh). The same participant added, *"If they don't have it themselves*

*maybe have more guest speakers in the classroom or have different people that can bring different knowledges in the classroom.*" Another student said that having guest speakers from different backgrounds and worldviews would help to create safety when discussing subjects that may be hard to talk about. *"In our studies, we are going to have instructors that you wouldn't feel as safe with but they can have guest speakers or have more group discussions involving people you feel you can talk about tough topics."* (Josh). *"It made a difference when White professors brought in speakers in from different cultures whether it was whatever subject matter it was to get that lens and that cultural piece. Where the text may not have covered it well, I appreciated that they brought in Indigenous people, knowledge keepers, whether it was talking about Indian culture or Spanish culture. And if they could not get someone in if they showed a good TED Talk where they brought that piece in."* (Gina). Again, Indigenous students felt that it was the professors' responsibility to bring diversity into the classroom in order to create the safe space. *"It should be their dedication to understanding that White knowledge isn't the supreme knowledge and that other knowledges are also valued." (Gina).*

As much as the racialized and Indigenous participants appreciated, or hoped for, diverse faculty, they recognized that White faculty made great efforts to provide a safe setting. One of the Indigenous participants noted that she was wary when she first entered a class with a White professor; however, her skepticism faded once the professor discussed her research with Indigenous Peoples. *"So the one professor, she was White and she introduced herself… so when I walked in, right away, I see that she is White and my first thought is are they this, this and this? Because, as much as they stereotype people of minority, I often do with White people. So, I already have these thoughts of who this person is going to be. But then she started to talk about her research with Indigenous people and she really comes from a good place. Her approach is very non-oppressive, anti-oppressive, so right away my safety meter went from there to there just by her telling us that, just having her speak about her research, the southern country and talking about decolonizing."* (Gina). The same participant went on to explain: *"They came in with a lens that I hadn't experienced before, not when I went to public school, or even in the workplace. I had never experienced the reverence they had for Indigenous people and that was shocking to me because I*

*hadn't experienced that before. So, it made a difference to me to have Indigenous ways of knowing as something interwoven into almost all of our courses*." (Gina).

It was interesting that, even though the racialized students wanted to have more racialized and Indigenous professors, they recognized that many of the latter faced more difficulties then White instructors. Many of the racialized students felt that when a racialized or Indigenous professor tried to teach from a different perspective, it was met with resistance. *"I remember the one Indigenous instructor being really upset with our class and speaking to her feeling on not feeling safe in the classroom. And she spoke about it with a few of us students who are racialized and Indigenous, how she got lot of people complaining about her. So if even the instructors don't feel safe themselves, I don't know how they can create a safe environment."* (Josh). Another racialized student noted that it was important for racialized or Indigenous instructors to teach different ways of knowing. However, the students felt that the racialized or Indigenous instructors were not supported enough, as a couple of longer excerpts from the transcripts demonstrate.

*"The biggest thing is implementing those things into the curriculum… having professors that are more racialized but also if professors are racialized having the support in the school that they are working in. Especially when they are teaching those certain subjects, safe spaces and such as that. When students make those comments that are really rude or out there, I guess it's hard, you want the professor to say that is a really inappropriate comment. It would help for them to do that but when I was talking to a professor… if it was a White professor saying it was an inappropriate comment they would be like okay yeah, if it was a racialized professor it would be taken way harsher. It should be a better learning experience but would be harder on the other end. I know that the people would think that the professor was targeting them."* (Josh).

*"I had one racialized teacher, there was not a lot of coloured faculty as far as I can remember. Even in that class, you can tell she did not have the support or the tools to teach us to the full extent of what she was trying to do in the Indigenous class. I think a lot of the teachers and students who are not coloured do not realize that these are my lived experiences and that little blurb is not just… it means much more than you would think. I didn't… like I was saying, I had one teacher, she was Indigenous, and I don't feel like she just kind of… we didn't learn as much as we could have learned and*

*you could tell that she wanted to do more with us but I didn't think she had the support from the school to be able to really take us out and teach us about Indigenous culture or the history."* (Tracy).

## B. Professors' Handling of Conflict

All of the participants mentioned that the manner in which the professors dealt with conflict made a difference in them feeling safe or unsafe in the classroom. Even though all of the students felt that it was important for the professor to respond to and handle conflict in the classroom, there was a difference between the racialized/ Indigenous students' and White students' examples of conflict. The racialized and Indigenous students' examples of conflict were about respecting different worldviews, speaking out against racism or allowing for space when triggered. The White students' examples were more intrinsic in that they focused on how the instructor responded to the students when conflict arose.

An Indigenous student mentioned that it was the professor's responsibility to set the tone for what is acceptable and not acceptable in the classroom. *"Again, I am going to go back to who is holding that space – going back to the instructor/professor and if they had set that tone to say in this environment we are respectful of all… Not to say people are not going to still have that judgement but to set that standard from the get-go and let that class know from the get-go that this environment that I am creating and this is what I do not tolerate, disrespecting anyone's life journey, whatever that is for them, is not going to be the same for somebody else, and that all pathways to healing and wellness should be respected."* (Gina). Other racialized and Indigenous students had similar views. Some of the students felt that the instructor or professor fell short in addressing these issues by remaining silent. *"I think there were a lot of people biting their tongues. Like if someone said Indigenous people need to just move on and let it go… it was said in not so many words, people were dancing around the subject… but have that open dialogue and figure out why people feel that way but it would never happen. There wasn't a teacher that would push and push until we had that dialogue. That causes some students to think 'oh wow, he is racist and I can't say anything,' and it causes other students to think 'oh maybe he is right,' and for them to feel a certain way about other students. I think just being able to have an open dialogue in the*

*classroom helps so much, instead of dancing around on the subject."* (Sandi). Another student pointed out that some professors would just avoid topics to avoid conflict; however, this did not aid in creating safety either. *"There has been certain topics that many profs have avoided. I have been told by one prof that he stays away from certain topics. There was a time he talked about the topic and he became ugly and heated. So, he just avoids certain topics because he does not want to foster that type of environment in class."* (Joye). Finally, instead of avoiding the issue, one student gave an example of a professor who was worried about offending a student instead of addressing the concern. "*Not in the way… I think she did it in a way to be diplomatic, so she wouldn't offend him. But it was like you are offending the majority of the classroom. I looked around and a lot of the females, and not just the Aboriginal, would not turn around and look and so then it got quiet and the topic kind of shifted and no one said anything about it again."* (Mary).

Students also reported feeling safe when their professors acknowledged and responded to the conflict. *"I think in all of my classes, even when it was not a place of cultural safety, I always felt like when there were comments made that were completely out of turn, derogatory or destructive or demeaning, I never thought, why didn't the instructor deal with that, or why did they let that go on, I always felt that in that sense that they had control over their classrooms and there was a certain standard they upheld."* (Gina). The same participant gave an example of one of the students making a racist comment about Aboriginal People: "*I hoped the professor was going to set this straight because if not, you are going to tell me that this is okay, to have that mentality is okay, and this is a teachable moment and she totally did and did it so well."* (Gina).

Finally, the racialized and Indigenous students discussed feeling safe when the professor addressed the issue of getting triggered in the classroom. "*When she realized I was crying she stood there and said are you okay. I said 'yeah, that just caught me,' and she said, 'so what happened?' So I couldn't talk, so she just gave me space and time and stood there. And I can, she was looking at everyone else to gauge their expressions. It might have been just a few minutes. I think when that happened to me before, I left the room, I was so uncomfortable I left, and I think that is what a lot of people do, is they don't want anyone to see their emotions. They are not comfortable with their own emotions. But I felt comfortable that I did not need to leave and allowing me to acknowledge what happened, like 'what happened that made you so upset?' And*

*what it was a video a former Aboriginal student had done about apologizing and she had other people, non-native, to apologize for whatever they had done. And what had… upset me is that, had someone apologized to my grandmother, the structure and the reality of my family would have been so much different. So, when I was able to explain that and acknowledge that is what happened and that is why I was so upset, people went, 'oh I didn't think about that' and it was such a powerful thing. And for that professor to allow that space and time for me to explain.*" (Lisa).

One of the White students shared an example of how they did not feel safe with the way a triggering event was handled. "*A student was upset and started crying. The prof was aware and ignored it. The student left the room. And after they left the room, the prof turned to us as students and said 'why you guys not acknowledged that, why did you guys not do something', and half of the students were not even aware of it or the situation. So, in that situation I think it was the opposite reaction. Where, had the prof had said 'I understand what triggered you' and talked about it with the classroom, maybe the student wouldn't have left. We felt blamed for the situation."* (Joye). From the White student's perspective, the professor's response might have felt targeted. This example demonstrates how a professor's response can be interpreted as both safe and unsafe by different students. It highlights the delicate balance that professors are faced with within the classroom.

I can think of times I have experienced this myself. For example, in one class, the group was discussing the concept of privilege. A White students commented that she feels she has less privilege when writing papers as she does not have oppressions to write about. Another student, who identified as Metis, responded that he does have privilege (perhaps), as there were many things he could write about. He also mentioned that there is an on-campus Food Bank for Metis students. I interrupted the class pointing out that the students may not have properly understood the concept of privilege. I explained that the white student not having oppressions to write about is an example of privilege, not lack of privilege. I also explained that requiring an on-campus Food Bank for Metis or Indigenous students highlights disparities of social location. In contrast to the Metis student, who expressed gratitude for my having addressed these comments, the White student's response reflected a sense of being targeted.

## C. Professors Displaying Openness and Respect Towards Students

All of the students were unanimous in recognizing that they felt safer in a classroom where they felt respected by the professors. I use the word *respect* as it seems to be the most fitting for the examples identified by the students. In this discussion, the term respect will refer to treating students equally, honouring their views and questions, and making them feel valued. Several of the students mentioned that they felt more comfortable in a class where the professors treated them with equality. "*Yes, also both of those instructors were part of the circle. They never stood outside of it. There was never, like, I am here, and you are up here."* (Mary*). "They never took sides. They were very neutral, but they supported, supported everyone in the classes… Everyone was supported and had the ability to say whatever they wanted to say. Those two classes, I would say that everyone, those were the two best classes with those two instructors. Because everyone just enjoyed… It was just like a conversation in the classroom for the whole lesson almost. It felt good, it felt good to be able to have a voice and actually say what you want to say. And not feel like, oh, someone is judging me."* (Mary). In addition, many students added that they appreciated not being judged by the professor. "*Two classes in particular where I felt more settled was my Individuals class with Jeff and Groups class with Raj. I really felt if I had a question, it would never be a stupid question. I did not feel the instructors would judge me."* (Tracy).

However, some students mentioned feeling judged for the comments they made or questions they asked. *"I felt the teacher wasn't receptive of the questions. You would ask the question and the way they would look at you or the way they would respond to it made me feel stupid. Like I am an idiot for asking for clarification because I did not get what you were talking about and that made me feel unsafe in the room to even ask questions."* (Joye). Another participant also raised this concern about asking questions. "*It could have been about anything. You know as a teacher you will ask a question to fuel conversation in the classroom? And you know sometimes it will be quiet and quiet is sometimes awkward. I will speak up to fill the silence and sometimes when I have… they were not receptive to what I was saying. Or sometimes if they were talking about a theory and I did not understand, I would ask a question… the way they*

*responded, I felt I was stupid for asking."* (Tracy). One of the students' examples combined the feelings of being treated differently and also being made to feel stupid for asking a question. "*I saw how they engage with other students, and how they responded, if one student asked a similar question they would respond perfectly and yet they would respond to another student so negatively for a similar question. This attitude and engagement with other students made me feel unsafe."* (Joye).

Going back to the feeling of equality, some students felt the professor positioned themselves at a higher level than them which did not allow for the makings of a safe space. *"It just felt like… it almost felt like the instructor was like, this knowledge is mine and this is the only knowledge and the right knowledge. And as long as you are seeing things my way then it's okay but if you are going to debate it or have any kind of critical thinking towards it then it wasn't okay. I mean they never ever came out and said it but that is how it felt."* (Mary). The same student mentioned another example. "The *way the teacher spoke displayed their power over us as students. They kept pointing out to the fact that we as students had power and they didn't. This further increased the power differential. They also stated they never give As and they can do whatever they want because they have been here for so long. It made us feel like what is the point."* (Mary).

As well as the importance of feeling respected, the students also appreciated being able to form a connection with the professor. "I *had gone and talked to one of the other professors that I had gained a real trust and relationship with and we sat and talked about it for an hour and a half and I said this is something I am always hiding and so we talked through it and I felt empowered by that conversation and it was relevant to the assignment also."* (Tracy) When professors shared more of themselves with the students, it made the students feel more connected with them. "*I think a lot of it has to do with them being themselves and natural… and their stories. That's another thing, sharing their stories and personal work and even letting us know a little about their personal life makes them seem more human*. *And you can relate to them a little better." (*Joye*). "I felt super safe with the professors because they related to me better. I am older, of the same age. I feel safer that way."* (Tracy). One participant also noted that when the connection was not there, the class did not feel safe*. "I think it was just going into the class and being there. And just be like, 'Oh hi, how are you?' Whereas in the other class it was more or less you go in and sit down and the instructor comes in and*

*they are busy at the front and right away get into the lesson. So there was no connection."* (Mary)

The final significant insight expressed by the students in regards to their professors and safety involved language. The participants appreciated it when the professors used language they could understand instead of complicated explanations. "*It's just coming down to that simplicity about things. People make things so complicated and lots of those classes too, it felt like it was so complicated and that was another reason I… didn't speak up because I would think, I don't know this, but when I would go home and start doing my paper, I would say this is so simple and I would get a good grade."* (Mary). The same participant noted that when language was complicated, it created a division between the student and the professor. *"The language and teaching style would make it complicated. It was like, I am the instructor, I am up here at the front and now you have to listen and take notes. I felt I had to memorize theories and perspective. Make sure I use the right language."* (Mary). Another student clarified how language is important in a different manner. She explained that she would look to see how the professor used language in the classroom. *"So language, demeanor, attitude, when they introduced themselves they would give their background on types of research they have done and that sort of thing… Usually the first thing I look for as a person of minority is language – how language is used"* (Josh). As a professor, I have heard similar comments from many a student. These comments suggest that use of needlessly complex language, suggesting a hierarchy of power and privilege, creates a disconnect between teacher and student within the classroom.

Professors were not the only ones identifies as important for the creation of safety. Participants noted that they, themselves, also played a role in how safe they felt within the classroom.

## 4.5 Students' Role in Creating Safety

While the participants identified the professor as playing a key role in creating safety, the next major theme identified in the data analysis was the role their fellow students played in creating safety. Most of the discussion around fellow students was

focused on how some of their peers made them feel unsafe in the classroom. However, this is important for the discussion, as these concerns can help others understand how safety may be created between students. Interestingly, it was only the racialized and Indigenous students who raised concerns around safety with their fellow students.

## A. Students' Response to Different Ways of Teaching

One of the biggest concerns that racialized and Indigenous participants expressed was the response of students towards different ways of teaching. The racialized and Indigenous students felt that there was resistance to doing things from a different worldview. This led to many of the participants feeling unsafe. *"Because there are a lot of questions, defiance, people not understanding or trying not to understand the different method of teaching… I think when it is diverted from the lecture style, readings, essays, it is met with resistance and that kind of shifts those classes that were trying to be different…. Because the students are not engaging. Like in the Indigenous courses, when the professor or instructor tried to implement different ways of teaching, it was met with resistance. So, to me that doesn't really create a safe space."* (Josh). The same student went on to explain that because students in the class were not accepting of different ways of knowing, he wondered what they thought about him. "*First it made me feel uncomfortable in the class because I felt like that if the students are not accepting the instructor that is trying to teach different ways of knowing… then what are they going to think of me as someone has different ways of knowing or different way of being. So, I kind of felt uncomfortable that these students had these values and it kind of made me think about, what do they think about me? It made me feel like I don't want to speak up about my way of knowing or my way of interpreting something or viewing something. So yeah, it kind of made me feel like I had to stay… I just stayed more quiet."* (Josh). *"I think some students would make comments, like 'oh how come we have to speak about Indigenous topics every single class when we already have separate classes,' and for me that parallels to all of us, for example why we talking about racialized knowledge or LGBTQ, and a lot of times we weren't talking about it and I always felt that if I brought it up is there going to be the same resistance. And it is interesting in retrospective that we are talking about Western knowledge in every classroom but… so why can't we talk about Indigenous knowledge*

*or other knowledge when viewing these topics. So comments like that… so it speaks again to the idea of tokenism… that idea of kind of adjunct… like we will incorporate indigenous knowledge but it is just an ad hoc… like we will add it to the side, it is just supposed to talked about in that class but not anywhere else. So even for me… I am not Indigenous, but I can't imagine how Indigenous students felt with those comments"* (Josh). Racialized students felt that non-racialized others created an unsafe space by rejecting alternative ways of learning in the classroom. Knowing that their alternative way of knowing were not recognized as equal, racialized students felt devalued and dejected.

Student Response to Different Worldviews

The racialized students also felt unsafe when their fellow students did not seem to value their worldview. Although students may not have come out and stated that they did not value their worldview, the participants pointed to examples of how they experienced this in the classroom. *"It is a catch 22… so you are tokenized by the person to speak about racialized knowledge or LGBTQ perspective… but then when you voice your opinions, it is kind of met with the resistance... like you know… eye rolls, or thinking 'oh this person is talking again about the same thing again.' Umm, yeah, so I think you are met with… kind of seen as a tokenized person to speak for all racialized people because you are racialized. So there is that piece around, I should have values of all different races and perspectives. And then on top of that it's when you do kind of speak from your perspective, it is kind of met with not acceptance in the classroom."* (Josh). Some participants mentioned that they would have liked to address some of the offensive comments made by other students. However, they hesitated depending on how safe they felt. *"Every class had one or two people who had a really different life experience or point of view, who then… myself, I found it difficult to not want to counter everything that they said, but sometimes I felt like I needed to say something depending on what it was, but sometimes I didn't say anything, also depending again how safe the environment was I felt.*" (Gina).

Interestingly, some of the Indigenous and racialized participants saw the issue in terms of some of their peers not understanding the privilege they hold. "*If there is not a complete understanding of what White privilege means… because what I have noticed in my life is people who deny White privilege are the ones who are most immersed in*

*that and don't see or understand. So I think it is important. In one class there was a White woman who… [in the first or second class] said something, that the Indigenous history is so in the past and it is time to move forward. I remember feeling like, 'Holy cow did she just say that?' and wondering what and knowing what that made me feel right away.*" (Gina).

Another explanation participants had for students' resistance towards different ways of knowing centered on the discomfort around or fear of change (a defense mechanism). "*I think it's… some of it's just fear of difference or change of the norm"* (Josh). "*From the students. Yeah so I think for students when it is something that is not part of their worldview, um, which is… for most people [who] are not oppressed, their worldview is seen in every aspect of society or community. So it's when there is something kind of challenging, that is pushing that… um, it's like a defence mechanism almost"* (Josh). "*That, you know, all this person is thinking of in a different way and that's in direct combat with how I view, rather that it just being a different way of thinking. It's almost like it is a combatting view. So I think that is what… I think people's innate response is to be defensive. Umm and I think I think the same way, if I feel someone is combatting my worldview, I sometimes feel like I want to be on the defense but then as a racialized person in the classroom your defense is almost silent right?"* (Josh). "*Being in a class with even one student who is narrow minded, or not receptive to the possibility of other views, definitely affects the way I would speak in the classroom or small group setting. It would make me quieter because I would feel more self-conscious or maybe this person thinks I am stupid"* (Joye).

## B. Microaggressions

The racialized students gave numerous examples of microaggressions they had to deal with in class, although they were not sure if these were intentional or indicative of a lack of understanding. They mentioned that some were directly aimed at them and some were said indirectly; however, the effect was the same on the students. It was hurtful and resulted in them feeling unsafe. *"Yeah, some students made comments about it. Like… oh you know… so and so got in because of those seats. Or that person got in because of the Equity seats. And so it really put… and then you internalized the racialization of that, that you just got in because of the seats. So I think*

*that really speaks to the students' lack of understanding of equity, um, and what that really means. I think that moment when that student made that comment is really the time I felt that this program is maybe not the most safe for me."* (Josh). *"Or people just assumed… I think those are just pieces around not assuming racialized folks or people who are oppressed have that much knowledge and those comments again are those microaggressions that the person may not realize are hurtful and how powerful those can be. And I will still remember that person exactly who made that comment and it was not even about me, it was about another student who was racialized and the comment that 'oh they got into the program because they are Aboriginal.'"* (Josh). Another racialized student gave examples of how other students made stereotyped comments towards her in several classes. *"I had other students tell me that, 'Oh your parents are probably paying for you to go to school, they are probably paying for you to live here and you probably have your car paid for,' you know, which wasn't true. I had student loans like everyone else but that was what they had grown up with seeing and maybe the few Sikh people or Indians that they had known, that was their life but I think it was hard for them to realize that you need to look at the individual instead of the whole group."* (Sandi). The third racialized student suggested that issues such as racism and microaggressions should be discussed in Orientation so that students are made aware prior to engaging in classroom discussions. "*I think especially when we are entering 3rd and 4th year, students should be… not only comments they make in class but even comments to professors and things like that, I think actually in Orientation, the importance of talking about things like racism. So be cautious about the things you say because they could be racist even if you did not intend that, not only critically think in your writing but also critically think when talking out loud. I know we are allowed to have opinions but respectful opinions when it comes to those things as well."* (Jenny).

## C. Silence

All of the students mentioned that, when they felt unsafe in the classroom because of issues pertaining to their classmates, they usually responded with silence. Many of the participants who had already graduated reported being unaware at the time of their silence in the classroom. *"But when I was put with people who did not want to focus on anti-oppressive practice or racialized perspectives or LGBTQ, I just felt I sat to the side and let them decide what I would do and I didn't really speak up. I just let the*

*group decide this is what we are doing and I just did what they asked.*" (Josh*). "I think that there were a couple of comments. It was interesting because they were from males. I think if I had been sitting in a circle, I would have been more that I have to say something, but because they were behind me, I didn't have to turn around and say something.*" (Mary). One of the racialized participants noted he witnessed another racialized student being put down by peers for speaking out all of the time. This caused him to be silent. *"I don't think I would ever bring up those things or feelings to my classmates. The safety was the biggest thing. I think I would be more ostracized by the students. One student who was really vocal with different perspectives, the other students would always talk about her and say 'oh she is annoying, she doesn't stop making comments, she is too much.' So those comments too… people get labels on them and that person was left out of social functions because of those values."* (Josh). One racialized student said that she used to speak up about topics such as racism and microaggressions but was criticized about it. This resulted in her becoming quieter in class. *"I think both, I do see myself speaking up more now. I think did I feel that I was unsafe in that setting not per se but I also felt I couldn't openly talk about my experience." (*Sandi).

## 4.6 Physical Environment

At TRU most of the classrooms are set up in a Western seating style with the teacher's desk and projector at the front and rows of desks set up for the students. There are a couple of exceptions. For example, there are some theatre style classrooms and one Social Work Classroom set up with tables in a rectangle shape. When discussing physical environment with the students, most of them mentioned how seating could lend to increased safety in the classroom. All except one of the students mentioned that they preferred having the seating in a circular fashion in the classroom. "*I really felt more comfortable in a class… like some of the Indigenous Classes because of the set up of the classroom for one."* (Josh).

Students had different explanations for feeling safer in this setting. It was interesting to hear how sitting in a circle made different students feel more like their whole selves. An Indigenous student stated the use of the circle made them feel more supported. *"Yeah, I definitely knew that when circles were used, for me I connected with*

*that right away with my Aboriginal ancestry. I knew that if an instructor used a circle, and it did not have to be the entire time, I had one instructor who had half and half, I appreciated that, because right away I know the circle is sacred, I know that it is safe, I know that it is supportive, I know that there is not supposed to be a lot of negative feelings or judgement."* (Gina). The same student went on to explain how the circle promoted cultural safety in the classroom. *"That the person who is holding that space at any given moment is to be respected. So just all those pieces that go along with a circle created that environment to safety so that was important in terms of cultural safety."* (Gina).

Many students mentioned feeling more comfortable sitting in a circle as they could see everyone in the circle and did not have their backs to anyone. This intrigued me as, in another class, students had voiced feelings of frustration as they sat in a circle. I wonder if this frustration reflected discomfort in doing something outside of the "norm"? I recall many a time feeling uncomfortable when forced to do something that did not agree with my worldview. For example, during my formative educational years, girls were forced to change in a communal room for gym class. As I come from a modest culture, I had a hard time changing my clothes in front of the other girls: I always chose to change in the little curtain room. It was situations like these that I adamantly avoided as much as possible. For whatever reason, however, this theme of discomfort in the circle did not arise in my study.

According to some of the racialized students, sitting in the circle made them feel safer as they would be able to read people's body language. *"I found I liked it better when the class was a circle or like a square because the desks are square… um, I liked having a view of everyone.. Um, I think I am really like… I don't know because I am racialized, I think racialized people have more sensitivity to body language and how there may be those microaggressions. So if you have a full view of everyone you feel a little safer."* (Josh). Another racialized student also felt safer when able to see everyone. "*I preferred a circle. I think it is a little more intimate, like you can see everybody, you are not staring at the back of someone's head, and I think when somebody is speaking, you should be able to see them and acknowledge that you are listening to them, so I like circles, in terms of a classroom setting."* (Sandi). This was echoed by an Indigenous participant, who felt that she would talk more openly when she was able to see everyone. *"I think if I had been sitting in a circle, I would have*

*been more that I have to say something but because they were behind me I didn't have to turn around and say something."* (Mary). *"I was able to see how people were reacting in a circle. I also could see who I did not want to be with."* (Lisa).

The White students also felt that the circle increased connection with other students. They believed that such connection may not have been made in "theatre type seating. *"I love when we sit in circles. I can see people and I am relating with people better. It was the nice thing in groups, individual and other class… It feels more inclusive. If someone is speaking I can see them, it's not someone two rows behind me. I like the round. It forces people to participate. It's really easy to sit back with your computer up and pretend to be listening and they are not. It felt less being lectured to. I didn't like putting the chairs away at the end."* (Tracy). "*Seeing the faces of people. If you sat in the front you may never be able to see the faces of other people. So more connection that way."* (Wanda). Finally, one of the students mentioned that having everyone sit in a circle, including the professors, helped to create equality. *"The classroom changes when you are in a circular setting and the prof is sitting down. It levels the playing field. They come down to our level in some sense. Also, when you are in a circle or even a U shape, you have the ability to see everyone, and talk and see their faces.*" (Joye).

Only one criticism was made by a student in regards to sitting in a circle. The student mentioned that having the circle was off-putting because it meant moving the tables and chairs around each time.

## 4.7 Program and Class Management

The final major theme identified by the participants in creating safety was in regards to the content and orientation of the program and of individual courses. Students commented on how diversity in the content of the program made a difference in how they felt. In order to establish safety, students also felt that, at the beginning of the course, there should be more discussion on safety and diversity. Finally, others suggested the course content needed to have more diversity in place.

## A. Orientation

One suggestion made by many of the participants was to start discussing diversity right at Orientation. For example, the students felt the beginning of the program, would be an ideal time to discuss these important concepts. *"Even a better understanding of what social location means would help, I think I only knew it at a surface level." (*Josh). Another student also mentioned discussing cultural safety in orientation. *"I think even a whole class on cultural sensitivity would be a really good idea. Because it is a huge part of social work and social work in Kamloops and Canada as a whole. I think it would be a good idea and even speaking about it at Orientation also… but how many people show up at Orientation?"* (Sandi).

## B. Setting Rules at the Beginning of Classes

Other students felt that even if these concepts were discussed at Orientation, there should be another discussion at the beginning of each course. They mentioned that doing so would set up guidelines for a safe space. *"Have that discussion the first day. So people coming in with apprehensions already… to alleviate them from the get-go, I think that's important… I think at that level of education and given what we are there for, we have to have honest discussions, candid conversations about those things from the get-go, so if there is any misinterpretations then it can be set straight."* (Gina). One of the students mentioned that having taken part in an inclusive discussion during his Master's program aided in creating safety. *"The thing I really liked in the master's program was, the first thing that was done when we met as a group was a discussion of what a safe space means to everyone and we talked about it for two hours. It was the first time as a cohort together. How do you as a group want to create a safe space in both environments? It created a sense of ease for everyone as this was our first discussion to happen."* (Josh). *"Talking about what makes a safe space in almost all of the social work classes. Ground rules, people would write on stickies, or talk about it in group. Especially for the younger ones, they need to be cognizant of making safe spaces."* (Lisa).

### C. Course Content

Course content was an important component in the creation of safety for many of the racialized and Indigenous students. They felt it was important to ensure that the content did not only represent the Western worldview. "*I think in a university setting especially there is often the dominant society, there are usually a lot of White men and women in the classes. A lot of content is focused on kind of gearing towards westernized knowledge and teachings. So I think like it is not only environmental safety but also the content being taught in class.*" (Josh). The participants felt safer when they discussed more diverse approaches to Social Work practice: "*the classroom or classes that had the content more focused on just diverse ways of practicing.*" (Josh). A fellow participant echoed these sentiments and mentioned a desire for culture to be discussed in every class. "*In one particular, it was the family violence class, and when we broke down why certain cultures won't leave relationships – whether you are talking about immigrants – and that is very important, I don't even feel like in our general classes we are breaking down immigrants or breaking down culture, and I think it doesn't matter if we live in Kamloops, so all of us students we move, we don't all stay in this community – I felt that when we talked about that even… I feel like race and conversations can be implemented in every single thing and there were differences.*" (Jenny). Finally, an Indigenous student indicated the importance of the First Nations classes being made mandatory. *"I don't know when they made the First Nations courses mandatory. At first, I thought, this is stupid, I am Aboriginal, why do I have to take these courses? But I am glad they make it mandatory because it definitely makes a difference to the culture of academics. And speaking about Aboriginal issues and topics is so much easier now that even 2005."* (Lisa).

## 4.8 Conclusion

The interviews were both informative and validating. I was surprised at how similar the experiences of racialized students were to mine, especially considering I had graduated over 20 years earlier. Although educational institutions have made significant strides with regard to racial acceptance and empathy, the stories which the students shared suggest that we still have much to learn with regard to their lived experience of the social work classroom. This observation is in keeping with the study

by Park and Bahai (2022) in which the experiences of graduate students enrolled in social sciences and humanities in Canada and representative of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) were explored. Park and Bahai (2022, p.152) found that, "despite the hegemonic narrative of the university as a space of inclusion, openness and fairness, the participants in our study narrate counter-stories that highlight how racism and colonialism shape their experiences of the graduate-level classroom." The stories which were shared suggest that a student's social positioning impacts their definition, and experience, of safety. Although this insight is not a newfound revelation for me, I was, to some degree, surprised that so much emphasis was placed on the professor when considering the creation of a safe space. When reflecting on my time as a student, I remember well the disappointment I felt when a White professor ignored a microaggression or failed to acknowledge a racist comment made in class. As a racialized professor, however, I have come to appreciate the complexities involved in formulating a response. To some extent, racialized students seem to better understand the complexities faced by racialized professors in comparison to non-racialized professors. Moreover, non-racialized students seem to be unaware completely.

Both racialized and Indigenous students felt that class environment and content continued to be dominated by the Western perspective. As such, I was gratified by the interest students expressed in diversification of faculty, guests, and scholarly content. To ensure that this happens requires changes both macro and micro. At the macro level, universities must be committed to hiring diverse faculty and supporting them as they teach from different worldviews. There must also be a commitment to integrating diverse perspectives in the program and curriculum. At the micro level, professors must give equal footing to diverse knowledges and be committed to decolonization of practice. I am aware that these suggestions are broad and, at first glance, can be daunting. However, the discussions I had with students unearthed some concrete strategies which can be easily implemented in most classrooms. For example, students felt that a classroom of acceptance could be encouraged by organizing desks and chairs in a way that recognizes the importance physical space. Further, students felt that, as a class, the topics of racism and privilege should be discussed as early as the first day of the program.

# 5 Sangat Teachings

Through my lived experience, I have come to appreciate the Sangat at the Gurudwara as a safe and ethical space. Did other members of the Sangat perceive this space in the same way? If members of the Sangat perceived this space as I did, could I integrate some of the teachings of this space into other spaces, such as the social work classroom, so that others could partake in this safe and ethical space? To explore this question, I interviewed members of the Kamloops Gurudwara Sahib Society (KGSS). I was eager to explore a space shaped by a worldview that differed from the Euro-Western perspective. Having been built by local community members in 2002, this is the newer of the two Gurudwaras in Kamloops, both of them based on Sikh spirituality and collective worldview.

I have been a member of the KGSS since its founding and a member of the Sikh community since birth. My parents, brother, sister and their respective families are also members of this Gurudwara. However, the Sikh culture is organized such a way that relationships are recognized outside the confines of blood relations. Given the close relationships I have developed with members of the KGSS, I consider them to be a part of my extended family. In this sense, including family in my research is expected, culturally, within my community. Acknowledgement of cultural protocols was evidenced through the interactions that I had with my elders. I viewed the elders as parents and, being younger than them, I found myself in the role of a learner. For me, it was important that I relate to them as my elders and take note of their words as important teachings; failing to acknowledge their insights and wisdom would be

disrespectful. This experience contrasted with the interaction I had with the younger group. Because I was older than most members of this group, the young participants treated me with the respect appropriate for an elder sibling or aunt. I was able to honour this relationship by acknowledging the lessons they shared; however, when engaged in discussion, I often found myself feeling, and acting, like a same-aged peer.

I approached the Sikh president and committee to discuss my research and request permission to conduct the research within the Gurudwara. I discussed my research with some members of the Gurudwara and a poster was then placed in the temple which prompted a couple of members to come forward and enlist others to participate. Without further intervention on my part, the participants self-organized themselves into two groups. I was amazed at how quickly these groups had formed; however, after some reflection, I realized that this was the nature of our collective way. I appreciated the formation of the two groups as this allowed members more time and intimacy to fully explore their answers.

The first group of participants consisted of seven Sikh women between the ages of 20 and 35 years. I communicated with one of the group members as she became their informal leader. I asked her where her group would like to meet. It was important that the group meet at a convenient, and comfortable, location. This group chose to have their circle at the Sikh temple following a Sunday ceremony. As a group, we chose to sit in one of the private rooms away from the other Sangat members who were occupied eating Langar. During the interviews, the interviewees were seated in a circle on the ground thereby placing everyone on equal footing.

The second group of participants consisted of five Sikh elders (two women and three men) between the ages of 60 and 80 years. Similar to the younger group, they also had one elder who acted as an informal leader. This group did not wait for me to ask where we should meet; they had already decided. This group chose to have their circle at the home of one of the elders. For this discussion, members sat in a circle around the dining room table while consuming tea and sweets prepared by one of the elders. These groups will hereby be referred to as Group A (20 to 35 years) and Group B (60 to 80 years).

In India, Sikhs do not have a set day of worship. Rather, Sikhs worship at the Gurudwara every morning and every evening. However, in the western world, many Gurudwaras hold formal worship on the weekends to accommodate the Western work schedule (Khalsa, 2021). At our Gurudwara, a worship is held every Sunday. This worship is attended by many members of the Sangat. After attending the Gurudwara for one such Sunday worship, I met with Group B at the home of an elder participant. It was a lovely summer afternoon, and everyone seemed to feel content and relaxed. The elders that hosted the group prepared chai and samosas for all of us to enjoy as we talked. I was nervous meeting with this group. I really wanted this session to go well as I sincerely respected their wisdom and wanted to hear their thoughts on the Sangat. For most members of this group, the Sangat had been a part of their lives for 60 to 80 years.

At first, the group was quiet. They did not know what to expect from this meeting and chose to focus their attention on the food. Given the dynamics of this group, I realized that this experience would be more authentic if we engaged in conversation. The conversation was in Punjabi, that being the first language for many of the elders. Speaking in Punjabi, I believe, led to a more rich and authentic engagement. One of the elders asked me what I was interested in knowing. I explained that I was curious of their experiences, feelings, and ideas of the Sangat. This spurred them to discussion.

Following Sikh protocols, I will refer to participants of Group B as Baba (grandfather) and Bibi (grandmother) as they are the elders in the Kamloops Sikh community and grandparents to the younger generation. My decision to refer to the elders as Bibi and Baba negates identity differences, thereby reflecting the Sikh practice of Seva (which means “service without asking for recognition”). As stated by Sohi, Singh, and Bopanna (2017), the Seva is a distinctive core philosophy of Sikhism. Seva refers to selfless service through community action, and it can be part of anything one does—at work, home, while interacting with neighbors and so on (Sohi, Singh & Bopanna, 2017, p. 2068).

The second group (Group A) wanted to meet at the Gurudwara. They suggested that we meet in one of the rooms right after the Sunday ceremony was completed. During this meeting, we were wearing Punjabi *kameej* and *Salwar*. Our

heads were covered with our *chuniis*. We sat on the ground in a circle. I was excited to meet with my peers to talk about the Sangat. Although we had gone to the Gurudwara together for many years, we had never sat down to talk about our feelings for, and experiences of, the space. I was the oldest in the group so, in accordance with Sikh protocols, I was seen as an older sister. I saw the participants as my younger sisters. I will, therefore, refer to them as Panji (sister).

Some of these participants appeared to be nervous. However, when we started to talk about the Sangat, we all became excited and passionate. During this discussion both Punjabi and English were represented; I responded to participants in the language they had spoken. Many times, we interrupted one another to agree with, or add to, each other's comments. Knowing that we all saw the Sangat as a sacred and safe space led to feelings of togetherness and bonding. Hearing their stories helped me validate my experience.

Despite differences in lived experience between the older and younger groups, the themes exposed during the interviews were consistent between the two groups. These themes included equality, belonging, community, teaching, peacefulness, and spiritual connection. In mood, I found the interviews with the Sangat members to be more relaxing than the interviews with the BSW students. Perhaps this was because the participants perceived, and spoke of, the Sangat as a spiritual place. Like the participants, I also felt the Sangat to be a safe and ethical space. Given the more relaxed nature of the interviews, I found the Sangat members more eager and open in what they disclosed. Among them existed a strong desire to explain what being within the Sangat meant. They were excited and authentic to share their passion with me. The experiences that were shared through the interviews affirmed for myself and the participants a recognition of the Gurudwara as a safe and ethical space.

## 5.1 Equality

All interviewees indicated that the Sangat's principle of equality made them feel safe in the space. Participants stated that the principles of Sikhism encourage Sikhs to treat everyone as equals regardless of income, work position, age, etc., and that the equality experienced in the Sangat led to them feeling more accepted. Both groups of

participants provided examples of how these principles were put into place in the Sangat. "*I think equality is also what makes it really welcoming. When everyone sits on the ground together, it gives you the sense that we are all here together and no one is bigger and more powerful than another."* (Baba C). This same participant provided an example of how equality is applied in the Sangat. "*The Sangat teaches us equality. We all sit together in the Sangat, we all sit together and eat.*" (Baba C). Another Group B participant stated that in the Sangat, everyone is seen as equals. Worth is not dependent on wealth, education, or social status. "*No one is better than the other in the Sangat. No one is 'bigger' than anyone else.*" (Bibi C). Likewise, Group A participants disclosed feeling like equals in the Sangat; an experience that they have not had at school or work. As stated by Panji D, "*There is no difference in the Sangat.*" I related to this sentiment of equality. Although most public domains have not afforded me a sense of equality, even as a child I felt myself to be on equal ground with others in the Sangat.

A participant from Group A highlighted the difference between the space created by the Sangat and the space created by the University. "*When we go to university, we learn, we pursue degrees. With that kind of knowledge, ego comes. But when we come here, we align with our knowledge. We are equal. The more knowledge you have of the Guru Granth Sahib, the more you become humble. It is not about being superficial.*" (Panji E). When discussing the concept of equality, and how it lends itself to creating a safe space, many of the participants talked about how they hoped it (equality/safe space) could be applied to other settings. "*If we applied that to our universities, where we have people from diverse backgrounds, there would be no racist issues. We would treat each other as equals. We would demonstrate humanity.*" (Panji D). Another participant felt that this concept should be applied at a larger level and not just limited to humans. "*If we looked at this space at a bigger scale, we could make the world a better space. If we looked at it in a bigger scale, we would help each other out. We would not judge each other. We're all from one source but we are different species. Don't treat a bird as a bird or an animal as an animal, they have a soul too.*" (Panji B).

## 5.2 Sense of Belonging and Community

The next theme highlighted by the participants was acceptance and belonging. The participants talked about how the space created by the Sangat made them feel accepted. "*Acceptance comes from recognizing that despite having different goals, we can accept each other regardless of our different paths.*" (Panji C). Participants added that the Sangat conveyed a feeling of non-judgment; even if a mistake were made, the person would still be accepted. "*No one looks at another and wonders why they are here or if they have made mistakes. We accept that it is good that they are here.*" (Panji E). The Sangat participants discussed how the Sangat instilled a sense of belonging which lent to the creation of a safe space. "*Everyone wants to have a sense of belonging somewhere. When you are with someone, you feel less scared and, sometimes, more confident. With how everyone is together, it shows you that you belong somewhere within this group. Coming here to the Gurudwara, no one is afraid. We are here as one group.*" (Panji D). "*No one can say you can't come here. Everyone is welcome. It feels like it belongs to everyone.*" (Baba M). "*It is everyone's place.*" (Baba S).

The elders perceived this sense of belonging at the community level. They spoke at length about how being a member of the Sangat connected them with their community members. The elders stressed the importance of communal connection for their emotional and spiritual health. "*When we are at the Sangat, we achieve peace of mind. We get to meet our brothers and get to talk to everyone. We get connected. We have a chance to talk about our lives, each other's lives, and what is happening in the community.*" (Baba B). "*When we go to the Gurudwara, we get to see everyone. We say our prayers and ask Waheguru for peace. This gives us a lot of happiness.*" (Bibi C). "*We go and be in the Sangat. We get to meet our sisters. We feel good.*" (Bibi M).

The elders noted that in addition to providing an opportunity to socialize with each other, the Sangat provided them an opportunity to find solace, help, and relief. "*We go to the Gurudwara and we help each other. We hear about the problems of others. We see that we are not the only ones with problems. Some people have worse problems then ours. It puts our problems into perspective. Sometimes, we go to the Sangat feeling heavy with our problems but leave for home feeling light-hearted, like*

*things are going to get better. We find solutions. By talking about our problems, we get a better perspective.*" (Baba M). Another elder participant spoke of how having an opportunity to learn of what is happening around him provided him with a sense of safety. "*When we go to the Sangat, we talk to each other and learn about what is happening in the community and around the world. At home, we may not know about these things. We learn about our religion.*" (Baba C). The women in Group B talked about how making food together helps in creating a safe space for them. "*We go and make food together. We learn from each other. We talk to each other. We get happiness and peace of mind.*" (Bibi C). Community connection was not lost on the younger participants in Group A. "*It is also about community. It is not just you. It is about everyone. We have a connection, a community relationship. No matter where you go, there is a Sangat"* (Panji A). The collective values of the Sangat provide the foundation for the sense of community; in turn, the sense of community leads to the collective nature of teaching and learning.

## 5.3 Sangat's Teachings of Safety

All participants spoke about how the teachings learned in the Sangat not only provided them with a safe space but also taught them how to create safety in their own lives. "*When we go to the Sangat, we learn about our religion. We learn how to behave with others, how to socialize. We learn all of this from the Sangat. If we don't go to the Sangat, we don't learn about our religion or about others. We get everything from the Sangat." (Baba C).* The same participant also spoke about how one's thinking improves by being in the Sangat. "*Prior to going to the Sangat, our thinking is one way. But, once we go to the Sangat and listen, our thoughts change. Sometimes people have bad thoughts but after we go to the Sangat, our thoughts change for the better.*" (Baba C). Participants spoke of the role the Sangat played in learning how to treat others with respect both in and out of the Sangat. "*We learn how to handle worries and stressors in life through the learning of religion. We learn about getting along with each other. We learn not to worry, not to gossip. We learn to respect each other. When we go to the Sangat, we get love from each other and we give love to each other.*" (Baba M).

The participants talked about how the Gianji (Sikh spiritual leader) helps to create a safe space. "*It is very nice. Our Gianji knows a lot. We get to understand.*

*Our knowledge increases by sitting in the Sangat and listening.*" (Baba S). The younger participants also valued the teachings of the Sangat. "*The lessons we are learning are different then what we learn in university.*" (Panji E). "*One of the things our Guru Granth Sahib emphasizes is the power of word. The power of word is something that could make such a big difference. I mean, we interact with each other through words. If we say a bad word, it can make a big difference. If we say a good word, it can also make a big difference. So, it is about being conscious about what words we are using. That is what is being taught in the Sangat.*" (Panji B). The participants admitted that the safety provided through the power of the Sangat is difficult to put into words. Rather, the power of the Sangat was something felt. "*According to our religion, we can do the prayers 100 times by ourselves but there is something about the Sangat that you cannot get without being in the Sangat.*" (Baba C). "*There is a real power in the Sangat. You get those chills!*" (Panji F). The teachings of the Sangat encourages the obtaining of serenity, peacefulness, and spiritual connection in one's life.

## 5.4 Spiritual Connection and Peacefulness

Many of the participants talked about achieving peace of mind when in the Sangat. The spiritual connection felt when in the Sangat was recognized by most participants as well. For many participants, peace of mind and spiritual connection allowed for the feeling of safety when in the Sangat space. "*The most important thing is that when we go to the Sangat, we get peace of mind. We remember Waheguru. We think that there is a creator. It is very important for us to go.*" (Baba C). One of the participants from Group A also mentioned the presence of Waheguru is the Sangat space. "*Waheguru is there in the Sangat. In the Sangat, we connect with the true guru. Over there, in school, it is just about learning. People work for their degrees. Here, in the Sangat, we try to connect with the true god.*" (Panji D).

Other participants spoke of how the Sangat space gave them peace. "*By going to the Sangat, a person becomes stress-free. We get to meet each other. We get peace and our families get peace.*" (Baba S). Many participants said that they often came to Sangat with much stress on their mind. However, the participants stated that they never left feeling that way. "*Personally, when I come here, I feel really relaxed. As soon as I leave the Sangat, these things come to my mind (i.e., getting groceries). But*

*here, the Kirtan, I am not worried, so I feel really good when I am sitting here.*" (Panji A). Some participants said that they felt stress-free upon leaving the Sangat and returning home. "*Everyone should go. If we stay home, we think about our problems alone. Everyone should go to the Sangat, even if you only go for a short time. See each other, relieve your stress. Going to the Sangat expands your thinking. We share our problems, we get peace. We come back home and feel good. Even our sleeping improves.*" (Baba M). As stated by Baba S, "*We forget all of our pains when we are in the Sangat.*"

## 5.5 Conclusion

To my surprise, this chapter, exploring whether, and how, the Sangat space provides its members with a sense of safety and ethicality, proved to be much shorter then the chapter focusing on the experiences of the BSW students. I can think of two possible reasons for this. First, the Sangat members were quite confident and concise in their discussion of the Sangat. Perhaps this is a manifestation of the safety felt when within this space. Second, the brevity of this chapter may reflect our way of knowing. According to the Sikh worldview, one should reflect inwardly and only say out loud what it is important to say. Listening and silence is favoured over unnecessary chatter.

Many periods of extended silence were experienced during my interviews with the elder Sangat members. I felt comfortable sitting in this silence and watching the elders contemplate what each other had said, as well as what still needed to be said. When the elders felt that enough had been said about a topic, they would let me know through their use of non-verbal gestures.

An earlier occasion, when I was asked to be part of a research interview between a TRU researcher and elderly Sangat members, illustrates this point. The purpose of the research was to explore health access needs for the Elder Sangat. The researcher had designated two hours for the interview; after asking her questions, the researcher asked the Sangat members if there was anything they wished to add. Nothing more was added by the Sangat members as they did not feel a need to embellish with frivolous information nor address unnecessary topics. As such, the interview concluded in less than an hour.

Finally, I acknowledge that my membership in the Sangat may have influenced the conciseness of the interviews. Perhaps the participants did not feel a need to extrapolate further as they were aware of my knowledge of the Sangat and the needs of it's' members.

The stories which the Sangat members shared provided me with a sense of validation and belonging. Most striking to me was how members described the Sangat space as a space of equality and acceptance. For the members, this seemed to be a fundamental characteristic of the Sangat space; although we may differ in income, education, housing, and social status, in the Sangat space, we are equal in culture and faith. This was enlightening to me. The equality inherent in the Sangat space reflects the tenets of Sikhism, as well as the humility of the Sangat members. Some of the Sangat members thought that this sense of equality should exist outside of the Sangat space—not only within the classroom but in the world as well. I am aware that such equality is dependent on efforts at both the macro and micro levels. At the macro level, such equality is cultivated through our culture and Sikh teachings; at the micro level, it is cultivated by the Sangat members who put these teachings into practice.

Listening to the members stories left me with a deep-seated appreciation for the responsibility they accept in creating an atmosphere of community and safety. The Sangat members expressed sentiments of respect for each other, as well as an obligation to support one another. They demonstrated a genuine love for each other. The women talked about the sisterhood they experienced when cooking food together. This open and accepting environment seemed to contribute to the well-being of many of the elder Sangat members. The Sangat members talked about the learning experiences they had when at the temple. They described learning not only from the Giani Ji, but also from each other. From the Giani Ji, they learned about the Sikh religion. From each other, they learned how to live with each other, and gave and received advice for dealing with upsets and stressors. In the openness of the Sangat space, the members had learned that each person has a gift to give.

The discussions I had with members of the Sangat were free from the politics of the gurudwara. I greatly appreciated the members' willingness to discuss the safety of the Sangat space without influence of pride or ego. For me, keeping religion and politics separate is paramount in the preservation of the Sangat's safety, integrity and

sacredness.   Although my study explored the Sangat within the Gurudwara, it is important to recognize that the Sangat is not limited to the confines of the Gurudwara. A Sangat can be achieved anywhere there is space free from inequality, judgement, and oppression.  If these qualifications are not met, even within the Gurudwara, Sangat cannot be achieved.  Thus, Sangat members did not idolize the concept of the Sangat; rather, they spoke of their experience of true Sangat.

# 6 Applying the Teachings

## 6.1 Reflection and Implementation

The third phase of my research, applying the teachings from the BSW students and Sangat participants, was both nerve wracking and exciting. I felt fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn from their experiences. To honour what I learned, I tried my best to apply their insights in the creation of ethical safe space. I found the process of practitioner inquiry to be a unique and enriching learning exercise. It made me realize the importance of reflecting on one's practice. It also made me realize that making changes in practice requires a degree of courage.

In preparation for this phase of research, I spent a great deal of time reading, and reflecting on, the insights of the BSW students and Sangat members. The impalpable and culturally grounded teachings of the Sangat do not lend themselves to direct adoption in practice; however, I was able to infuse the teachings into my reflections and pedagogy. As a social worker, I strive to create an environment of ethicality and safety in the social work classroom. However, rather than rest assured in my practice, I thought about how my methods could be refined.

As I reflected on the insights of the BSW students and Sangat members, I realized that some their teachings were beyond my reach. For example, BSW students talked of changes that would help in the crafting of a safe and ethical classroom space. Though I could not change the classroom itself, I could change how the desks and chairs could be arranged. Though I could not talk about privilege at the orientation of the social work program, I could talk about privilege at the start of the semester. Though I could not change comments that other students made, I could help craft a classroom in which unsafe conditions caused by fellow students would be minimized. I also thought about how my Sikhi teachings could be applied to the social work classroom. Given the uniqueness of both the Sangat and the classroom space, could my Sikhi ways of knowing be used to promote a philosophy of collectiveness? To ensure that my goals were attainable, I had to be realistic and flexible.

I decided to explore the impact of these insights in two of the courses that I taught. The first of these courses was Social Work and Mental Health. The second course was Social Work Groups. Both of these courses are electives which students complete in their 3rd or 4th year of the BSW program. Having taught these courses for at least 6 years, I was very comfortable with the curriculum. As such, I could really focus on applying my findings. My aim was to apply as much of what I learned into these courses throughout the semester. Admittedly, I was not able to integrate all of my findings from the students, as some of them were focused on other students in the program or on the program itself.

To keep myself accountable and organized, at the beginning of the semester I listed the pedagogical changes I wished to try in a journal. I was able to cross some of these off the list as they were completed, while others were ongoing through the semester. For example, one of my undertakings was to discuss class collective agreements at the beginning of the semester. I was able to cross this off the list after it was completed. Re-arranging of desks in a circle formation occurred each week, so each week, this would be crossed off the list. Other undertakings pertained to my teaching style. To gain insight into these, I discussed my implementation of them with Racialized and Indigenous colleagues, who gave me feedback as well as providing me with insight based on their experiences. I noted my reflections from this process, as well as challenges and/or missed opportunities, in my journal. Through this practice, I was able to ensure my accountability and decide how best to move forward, while compiling a record of my teaching journey through the semester.

At the beginning of the semester, I informed my students of my research topic and my intention to integrate some of my findings into the classroom setting. Being concerned about influencing the results of my research, I chose not to review my findings with my students. However, I did inform my students that they would have an opportunity to voluntarily participate in interviews to discuss their experience of the classroom at the end of the semester.

The fourth phase of my research involved interviewing the students to discuss their experience of these two classes. I wanted to see if my students felt that the classroom was a safe and ethical space in which they could be their whole authentic selves. For this fourth phase, I asked students if they would prefer to engage in

individual interviews or in group (circle) interviews.  As the students chose to engage in group interviews, they were seated in a circle.  Food was offered by myself and my participants as we had decided, beforehand, to partake in a potluck.  Concerns I had about students' reluctance to engage in open and candid discussion were quickly extinguished.  Encouraged by their peers, participants spoke openly about their thoughts and feelings.  I believe that the discussion which ensued reflected the relaxing and comforting environment we were able to create.  By sitting in a circle, we engaged with each other without worrying about status or hierarchy.  By sharing food, we were able to engage as equals.  As a professor, I found this experience to be validating and invigorating.

In this chapter, applications of my findings (phase 3) are integrated with my observations about the students' experiences and perceptions.  Participants from my Social Work Groups class are referred to as Group G and participants from my Social Work and Mental Health class are referred to as Group M.

## 6.2 Crafting Safety Through Environment

An essential characteristic of a safe and ethical classroom is its physical milieu. The traditional Western, 'sage-on-the-stage', class structure promotes an ambiance of expertise and authority, thereby impeding students' willingness to engage in open discussion.  I find that students who feel comfortable in voicing their thoughts and opinions in such a setting tend be those who are privileged.  It is these students who

tend to unwittingly commit microaggressions or utter racist comments. With their classmates seated in rows behind them, these privileged students may be unaware of the impact of their comments. Unfortunately, within this environment, racialized and Indigenous students are often less likely to share their thoughts and ideas. Moreover, with all the students facing the professor, I find that the classroom takes on an impersonal, automated, disposition. With the students all facing towards me and unable to observe each other, non-verbal communication takes a lesser position or is altogether forgotten. As the professor, I find myself placed in the complex and uncomfortable position of authoritative expert paid to respond to the needs and expectations of my students. The unease inherent in this theater is amplified by my being a racialized professor.

The majority of the phase one participants identified circle-seating as transformative in its ability to craft a space of safety and equality. The students' revelations led me to ponder on the importance of one's physical situation in space. Therefore, I incorporated circle-seating in both classes. The group course allowed for circle-seating for the entirety of the semester. Being smaller in total number of students, I found it easy to move the desks aside and arrange the chairs as needed. However, because the Social Work and Mental Health course had 31 students, the circle was quite large, especially given the confinement of the classroom parameters. In this class, the circle was used for the entire semester even though it took on a square-ish shape as the desks occupied much of the available space. Wanting to take notes and write, students chose to sit behind their desks.

As different ways of knowing tend to flourish within the space that adopts circle seating, I arrived to class early so that I could arrange the chairs and desks befittingly. I elected to do this so that my students were greeted with an inviting environment that stood in contrast to the authoritarian 'sage-on-the-stage' classroom. Joining the privileged few were the voices of the racialized students who had not felt comfortable speaking in a Western classroom environment. The discussions which took place involved different worldviews and promoted more in-depth critical thinking. As students were talking more to each other and reflecting, I found that there was more opportunity for critical thinking. Some of the racialized and Indigenous students engaged in discussion about the topics presented. Often, these discussions were representative of their own worldviews. By speaking about oppressions faced due to positionality, these

students were able to embolden their peers who then shared their own stories were presented from their own worldviews. Relationships between students seemed to flourish thereby creating a class community. The empathy stimulated by the circle-seating resulted in fewer micro aggressions and slights towards others. Because students seemed to be more observant of each other and their non-verbal cues, they seemed to take more time to think of what they were going to say before they said it. Finally, as the professor, I found that the circle-seating took the onus off me as the 'expert' thereby allowing me to become more involved with the group. When seated in a circle, students were more apt to engage in relational discussions with their peers. Although I still had "expert" knowledge on some aspects of the course content, when engaged in circle seating students came to see each other as possessing "expert lived knowledge". As the course progressed, students started to look for answers from their peers rather then from me.

As a group, we discussed the circle-seating at the end of the semester. Although I found the circle-seating to be very effective, I did not want to assume that the students felt the same, especially given the large class size. To my surprise, almost all of the students in both groups reported feeling a sense of safety when sitting in a circle. Autumn (Group M) stated, *"I think in terms of the space, the circle, the way we organized the desks, I think it is super important to have eye contact with everyone. Not even eye contact, but almost physical presence contact, which, even though if I am not looking at you, which sometimes makes people uncomfortable, just knowing that their body is present there and we are all sitting the same way.*" In my observations, I noted that the students were more engaged with what their peers were saying. Though some students did not speak a lot, the non-verbal communication they shared with each other became more evident. More eye-contact was made with those who elected to voice their thoughts and ideas and more nodding was observed when something spoken resonated well with others. Finally, when a student spoke on a topic which was emotionally difficult, there was more mirroring and expressing of empathy from peers. Students who had been quiet and reserved in other classes which I taught now looked quiet comfortable as part of the circle.

One of the Group G members shared some thoughts about why it was easier to become comfortable in the classroom when seated in a circle. *"I was a lot quicker than I would be, relative to other classes because, I think the people, the environment, of*

*sitting in a circle and being able to, kind of like, see people's non-verbal expressions, supporting and stuff. And, ummm, and listening and holding that space respectfully. Like there was a lot of times when I would go to speak but I can take longer sometimes but I was given that space to speak. I appreciated that.*" (Brian, Group G). From my notes, I likewise observed that fewer interruptions occurred when someone was speaking. Because the students were looking at each other in the circle, they were able to see that the speaker was still thinking about what they were going to say. Students were also able to see if the speaker was becoming emotional. In such cases, students sat in silence in order to give the speaker time to process their emotions and collect their thoughts.

Discussions were very intense in both classes. I believe that circle-seating encouraged participation and depth of critical thinking. In the mental health class, a racialized student talked about the challenges of being a Muslim woman confronted by oppression in most spaces. I believe that sitting in a circle helped to facilitate these discussions. She challenged us all to consider the problems faced by Muslim women in Canada. It was moving to see a student take the space as a "teacher" in the classroom. Students mentioned this when we engaged in discussion regarding their experience of the circle-seating. Some of the students felt that sitting in a circle increased their level of participation during class discussions. June (Group G) said that *"it encouraged me to participate more as well because it is easy to sit in the back and hide; especially when seeing each other's face. It was easy to see if someone was going to talk."* This sentiment was echoed by Shelley (Group M) who said, "*yeah, I think it really forces (you) to go out of your bubble, right! And I think we get really comfortable in our bubble. Its not that we are unwilling to get to know other people but you are just drawn to."* One of the students commented on how sitting in the circle lessened the distraction caused by her cellphone, thereby increasing her engagement. *"I will go into a classroom and think I can really be really passive today and go on my phone. But this is like, 'no, I have to show respect and be with my classmates', which I think back in this course, it makes me feel more inspired about social work. It makes me feel more like I learned a lot more and it is physically more comfortable. I don't know if other people had that experience."* (April, Group G).

Though the majority of students preferred to sit in the circle, two of the students (both from Group M) reported otherwise. Raiya (Group M) said, "*I just don't like the*

*circle. I feel people in this corner, in that corner, and, so far apart. Such a width between people. I felt further away; we were such a ginormous group. I think it works better with a smaller group. It was such a big group with tables all around. I hated that part.*" Janet (Group M) mirrored this comment. *"I do appreciate circle work and I was more uncomfortable in this class because of the tables and desks. And, I found I didn't develop relationships like I did in the smaller class. I know there are a lot of factors, but I think the distance was part of that, and the size of the classroom,"* Other students in the Social Work and Mental Health course felt that the arrangement was cumbersome; however, they still preferred sitting in a circle. "*I can see what people say. But, I guess, if it is the same class size, I would prefer not to have my back to others because I find I don't get to know people at all or I am in my own bubble and wouldn't even know the faces in the other side of the room,"* (Shelley, Group M).

Overall, I think having the students sit in a circle helped in the creation of a safe and ethical space for the students. Some students did mention that it would be helpful for the university to have chairs and desks with wheels so that it would be easier to form the circle. Other students said that leaving the desks and moving just the chairs would help to create the circle. One student said that it might have been a good idea to have students sit in different spots in the circle. The last suggestion was to take the class outside and incorporate the outside environment to make the students feel more at ease.

## 6.3 Crafting Safety through a Class Collective Agreement

At the beginning of the semester, in order to create safety in the classroom, we collaborated to craft a collective agreement. Phase one interview participants suggested that safety, cultural inclusivity, and oppression be discussed during course orientation. Since the students' orientation to the program had already been completed by the program coordinator, I decided to start the semester by discussing safety and inclusion followed by formulation of a collective agreement focused on student contribution to class safety.

This was not entirely new in my practice: I had done something similar prior to my research. However, my research findings suggested to me that I did not dedicate

enough time and depth to this task and that, as a racialized professor, I had been hesitant in challenging some of the colonial ideas that may have been present but unacknowledged during discussions of safety. To prepare for the discussion this time round, I read about the experiences of other racialized professors and connected with other racialized professors to learn how they worked through relevant issues. As I did this, I reflected deeply on the diverse experiences reported by racialized and non-racialized students in the phase 1 interviews. Finally, I took the time to reflect on the protocols which help to create safety in the Sangat space. As members of the Sangat, we understand the importance of these protocols. We understand the respect demonstrated toward each other; we allow others to talk and we listen to their truths.

I had not included the discussion of privilege in previous safety rules. As I reflected on this, I realized that I had omitted this topic from the first day of class in order to avoid upsetting students of privilege. I did not want to give them a negative first impression. I realized that this was a form of internalized racialization; I was honouring the privilege of students and, in turn, creating a space which was less safe for me and my students. Furthermore, my choice to leave myself out of the discussion of safety had resulted in the separation of me from the classroom. Given what I had learned through the Sangat, I had become more aware of how everyone plays a role in creating a space of safety and ethicality. If our Giani Ji abided by a different set of rules while in the Sangat, we would not experience a sense of safety. This realization left me with an understanding that I must include myself in the discussion of being a racialized professor.

I opened discussions on safety by acknowledging that everyone was present in order to learn; I stressed the importance of creating safety in the classroom in order to encourage deep and authentic communication. I explained to students that interpretation of safety could be different between individuals, in part due to issues of privilege and worldview. As the discussion evolved, students' thoughts became more intricate and complex. Students from both classes seemed to express similar ideas with regard to crafting a safe classroom. Some of the dominant ideas included: understanding one's own privilege and respecting each other's worldviews and lived experiences; putting away electronic devices and giving everyone equal opportunity to talk; checking in with oneself and taking a break from class if feeling triggered; and checking in with the instructor after class if requiring support. Our dialogue also

involved talking through differences and conflict in the classroom. I discussed experiences I have had working through student conflicts and challenging ideas that might be experienced as disrespectful. I discussed my experience as a racialized professor and how, many time, I felt lessened by the power students held over me. The students were interested in this discussion. They realized that professors can also be on the receiving end of racialization and understood that such dynamics can impact the creation of safety in the classroom. The students and I agreed to adopt these rules within the collective agreement for the duration of the semester. We also agreed to revisit this agreement should they need to be adjusted.

Discussing safety rules in the collective agreement at the beginning of the semester helped to bring about the creation of a safe space throughout the semester. Students appeared to be mindful of others' perspectives during class discussions. In conjunction with adopting circle-seating, privileged students seemed cognizant of practicing silence so that they could listen to, and learn from, the perspectives of others. They were less inclined to assert their perspectives dominantly and more open to learning about the truths of others. During discussions, privileged students made space for others to talk. I recall a couple of instances in which I challenged mainstream perspectives that students had expressed; however, these same students were receptive to exploring these issues through the viewpoints of others. For example, we talked about the concept of being brave enough to be vulnerable or embracing vulnerability. Many of the students loved this concept and felt it should be adopted by others. I discussed how this can be a privileged concept as many oppressed people may not have a choice of being vulnerable in many situations. In fact, many times they wish they had a choice of vulnerability. I gave them some examples from my lived experience as a racialized women. The students had a good discussion on how many times we may not see how these popular concepts may not apply to all world views.

At the end of the semester, we engaged in discussion to determine whether the "safety rules" in the collective agreement influenced the creation of safety in the classroom. All of the students agreed that it did. *"Establishing our ground rules and going over that piece really made things safer for me."* (Ron, Group G). *"Yeah, I think going over the rules at the beginning and when we went over those rules. I think we left space for people to share, and I even felt when we were sharing the ground rules, I could be authentic in what I thought would feel safe. So, I think that really helped for*

*me to create a safe space."* (Terry, Group G). One student pointed out that safety was created by not only establishing the rules, but also by adhering to the rules. "*I also think when we were leading group and having that type of circle was really respectful of the person facilitating. I think, like you said, for me personally, I get distracted by anything but when people are on cell phones or laptops it drives me nuts! But I feel it was definitely respectful for the person facilitating. Everybody was accountable for their presence. I didn't feel like the need to be distracted. I felt personally when facilitating, I enjoyed that setting. I felt I could gauge each person. It lent to creating a better facilitation and group overall."* (Sally, Group G). The point this student made resonated with me as I have taught classes where we established safety rules which were not followed by all students. I suspect that spending time, in depth, and ensuring that everyone had a chance to contribute helped in honouring these rules.

I believe that having a discussion about privilege and worldviews may also have helped students appreciate the importance of honouring safety rules. Ron (Group G) said that "*one of the groups, we did the privilege, even doing that activity, I don't think anyone felt judged because you have privilege and I think that can be really uncomfortable. I think everyone was aware of that type of thing and I think it was really nice that people were comfortable to be themselves. Which can be uncomfortable sometimes specifically in social work which I find kind of odd. But I find that if you… this is just my experience of it in different classes with different people, I find that if you don't follow the social work ideal for every single thing, I feel people look at you and think, 'why are you in social work if you believe this or vote that way?' It's like, we are so judgmental of people who do not follow the linear idea of what a social worker looks like and I didn't find that was the case in this kind of class at all, which was really nice. People were comfortable about talking about spirituality and things like that, like orientation and gender expression.*"

One of the White students in Group M insightfully asked whether all students felt safe in the classroom or if (the students) were silenced because they did not feel safe. "*Something that I have been thinking about is 'what safety looks like for each person and how that plays out within the classroom?' Because I know when I feel safe, I feel like I can contribute and talk a lot. But you sometimes choose not to talk. But that is your choice but you still feel safe. But I think there are other times where people, and I am not talking about this class, I am just generalizing, don't talk because they don't feel*

*safe to do so. How are you ever supposed to get their perspective because they don't feel safe enough to speak up?*" (Wanda, Group M). This query was answered by Raiya (Group M) who said, *"But, I think I speak to this as I am not represented in this group or anywhere at all, understanding that there are spaces where I don't feel safe. But this is one space I did actually feel safe. I get vibes very easily and get uncomfortable in a classroom very easily. But I think I can speak for my class fellows who are not well represented in the class and they felt the same way in this class."*

By having the students establish rules for safety, we were able to create a safe space where everyone felt they were able to contribute. Autumn (Group M) said "*I felt like we really created a safe space. So, I definitely was pretty authentic. Um, but yeah, I just felt really safe… comfortable. I think we had a really good group of people but you did a really good job of creating that safe environment for us to talk about our personal experiences."* Ron (Group G) added *"overall, I think it was a super safe space. You allowed, let a lot of room to explore in the classroom, and what we could do and guided us to better our learning.*"

## 6.4 Crafting Changes through Changes in My Pedagogy

The teachings of the students and the Sangat illuminated for me the importance of adopting pedagogical practices which help create a safe and ethical space. For me, this meant adopting practices demonstrated by the Sangat and the Giani Ji. As I mentioned earlier, I realized that there were times where I may have avoided conflict due to my being a racialized instructor. Being a racialized instructor, I think, makes one feel vulnerable to what privileged students say if they are confronted. Experiences of microaggressions and oppressions in the classroom had become an impasse for me. However, I now value my experiences as they help to inform my practice rather then stand as obstructions to my social justice goals. Strengthened by my insights, I aim to respond, in the moment, to microaggressions which occur in the classroom. I prioritize connecting with other racialized faculty so that I can debrief from uneasy experiences and enhance my pedagogical decisions.

One of the findings from the initial interviews was the importance of diversity for students. The students wanted to hear from diverse faculty who were willing to share

their lived experience and worldview.  As a racialized instructor, I was fortunate to be able to bring this to the classroom. Although in the past I had shared stories of my practice with students, based on what I had learned, I decided to share more of my lived experiences.  Talia (Group M) said "*I thought what really made this group very authentic was how you were able to bring your experience in from work or even from your culture and background.  And, even how everyone in the group was able to be themselves, not feel pressured to portray themselves as someone else.  Like, you come in the group and you do what you do, you talk if you want to. You don't really have to impress anyone or sound smart or try hard… it was just natural. It just went with the flow and that is the way it should be in a group setting*."

At times, my Sikh worldview becomes knotted when practising social work in a Western dominant system.  During a lesson, I spoke to my students about my experience working with an elderly woman from my community who had been admitted to the psychiatric unit.  Being fluent in Punjabi, I was asked by the attending psychiatrist to speak with the elderly woman.  When speaking with the elder, I addressed her as "Masi".  The staff asked me what the word meant so I told them that "Masi" means "Aunt" in Punjabi.  I was asked if it was ethical for me to work with the elderly woman given this relationship.  I explained to them that I was not related to her by blood.  However, because I did know her from my community, it would be inappropriate for me to address her by name.  I adopted an Eastern perspective when working with this elderly woman.  As per her request, I sat on the bed combing her hair and shared the food that her family had prepared.  I told the family that I would encourage her to meditate as this is a fundamental treatment method according to the Sikh way of knowing.  These actions, from a Western perspective, "crossed boundaries" and, as such, were questioned many times by the nurses.  However, it was important, for me, that I provide culturally safe practice.  Raya (Group M) appreciated my discussion of culture and mental health.  *"I also really liked, in our last class, how you brought up culture and mental health.  And that was a super important topic for us to go over."* Raya commented on the way incorporated culture and how it differed from the other classes she had been in.  *"You can do it really well.  They talk about culture in almost all classes, a bit here and bit there, but it does not have that kind of an impact or people don't take it seriously."*

In the Sangat, learning happens through the lessons of the Giani Ji, through engagement with other Sangat members, and through the enactment of the protocols of our Sikhi. How could I, as a professor, bring these different ways of knowing into the classroom? As I have previously stated, pedagogy within the Canadian university often adopts a Western worldview. For example, written assignments are often favoured over oral assignments. However, many cultures favour oral or written discourse and relational rather than individual learning. Therefore, I decided to incorporate different ways of teaching into both classes. For the Social Work and Mental Health class, I changed the group presentation to a Métissage and for the Social Work Groups class, I conducted the class as a group rather than a lecture. As explained below, these two changes helped to create a sense of safety for the students.

### 6.4.1 Métissage

Dwayne Donald's work informs my understanding of how Métissage can be applied to my pedagogy. Donald recognized the persistence of tension between Canadian and Aboriginal peoples due to colonization. He discusses the challenge of finding “a way to hold these understandings in tension without the need to resolve, assimilate or incorporate” (2012, p. 53). Donald (2012) says “One central goal of doing Indigenous Métissage is to enact ethical relationality as a philosophical commitment. Ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to understand more deeply how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other I see the work in education as basically a philosophical problem” (p. 53). In order to combat these misunderstandings, Donald has developed the educational philosophy of Indigenous Métissage. After having engaged in, and taken the time to reflect on, Donald’s Indigenous Metissage, I have come to realize that braiding together stories, which may represent contrasting worldviews and life experiences, enables one to understand the relationship which exists between stories and experiences. As a group assignment in the Social Work and Mental Health class, the students were asked to create a Métissage of their own mental health stories. This was a powerful tool as it challenged students to see stories through the worldview of ‘others.’ This highlighted the connectedness in their stories.

The feedback from the group was inspiring. Autumn (Group M) stated "*in terms of group work, I really liked the project we did together with the group! It was… I don't even know… it was really good! There were no words, even the presentation of it, using the tactics of grounding while we listened… it worked really well!*" This sentiment was corroborated by Talia (Group M) who said, *"I would agree with the opportunity for the Métissage project. It was a super vulnerable, it made me super vulnerable, it is not something shared openly or had that opportunity with people in all my education. I think that made us be able to support more one another because when one person opened up, it kind of made it okay for you as well. The Métissage project is a big factor."* Randy (Group M) said, *"as a third-year student coming into a fourth-year class, I was really intimidated to start with. But, again, the Métissage, I was able to form bonds with everyone. The classroom was really warm and your instruction was really warm. I felt it was a totally safe space."* Raya (Group M) said, "*I think you created that space for us to become vulnerable and bring out that weak spot in us. I went into a whole deep process with this story… this Métissage… even admitting it was difficult but I am okay with it now. You took the responsibility of providing us that safety network so that we could just be ourselves in front of everyone*." Finally, Talia (Group M) said, "*the Métissage too, our presentation, was so emotional! And the two Métissage leading up to ours were super heavy! When we went, we were very emotional when it was happening. But the amount of support that I felt from the room, like I did not feel like anyone was judging me or my group members for what we were saying."*

Other students mentioned that feeling safe in the classroom made them more open to sharing their stories. "*I was actually writing and I was like, 'holy crap! I have been in, this is (going to be my fifth year in education) and that was my very first time ever writing down what I felt was my story. That was a really good experience! It was hard, but it was good!"* (Shelley, Group M). Autumn (Group M) added, *"we all have so much lived experience that, you know, that was not oppressed at all in this class. People were able to share their experiences."* One of the students regretted not sharing their story after seeing how others who shared were greeted with empathetic responses. "*My original story I chose, I shared with my spouse. And he looked at me blankly and he said, 'you are going to share with the whole room of people?' And because he said that, I wrote a different story. Looking back, I kind of regret not voicing at that moment.*" (Michelle, Group M). Expressing her sense of safety in the classroom,

Shelley (Group M) said, *"you gave us the option… too… that it does not have to be personal. So, I think you are right. If they didn't feel safe, they wouldn't have shared their story."*

Although teaching students about the effect of stigma on mental health has been a longstanding part of my pedagogy, the stories my students have shared about their lived experiences have been so profound that I have since changed my professional practice. Through the intertwining stories of the Metissage, students have been challenged to rethink their appreciation for, and understanding of, those suffering with mental illness. "*I think the Métissage really helped with that too! Like, it normalized mental health. We all had similar stories that related around mental health*" Randy (Group M). Through the vehicle of metissage, students who had never felt safe enough to share their lived experiences have since been emboldened to do so. Several times have I found myself in awe of the power and impact of the metissage. Through this medium, students are able to find the courage to share and intimate information within the classroom. I share in the vulnerability students feel when they begin to speak and the sense of relief and empowerment they feel upon conclusion. As I look around, I witness other students listening with intent and being appreciative of the speaker who has taken the chance to tell their intimate story.

### 6.4.2 Class Conducting as a Group Facilitation

To reiterate, for the duration of the semester, the Social Work Groups class was conducted as a group with no professor-led lectures in this class. I sat in the circle with the students and taught as one of the group leaders. Initially, some of the students were apprehensive of this idea as it did not coincide with their 'usual' university experience. However, over time, students really enjoyed this method of class organization and had very positive things to say about it. Ron (Group G) said he *"felt really connected. Obviously, like, the way we configured the group. Usually in a regular classroom, everyone is so disjointed doing their own things. I felt a sense of connection."* Several students echoed this sentiment.

By assuming the role of a group member, differences in status and power were diminished. As an equal, I was better able to model attentive listening, empathetic responding, being comfortable with silence, and asking open-ended questions, as well

as other skills relevant to participating and facilitating groups. The skills I demonstrated helped in the creation of a safe environment. In order to establish a safe environment in which such sharing could happen, I focused on my presentation and how my presentation affected the classroom. For example, Randy (Group M) said, *"I really thought your eye contact helped, Raj! It made me comfortable and safe within the classroom to talk!"* Autumn (Group M) added, *"I think it speaks to you being present and the idea of being mindful! Half the time, I am very mindful! But you are very present!"* With regard to how my presentation effected the classroom, Ron (Group G) said, *"Yeah, I don't remember a lot of conflict either, which is telling on its own. Creating that safe environment. Yeah, I also agree with that as well. In terms of setting up the group, I think you really modeled what groups are supposed to be about. You know, kind of balancing power and having an anti-oppressive environment. I think you really modelled that idea of a sharing power, you know'.* Not only did the students feel connected, they espoused being better able to understand the perspectives of their peers. For example, Brian (Group G) said, *"multiple perspectives, like they were all seemed to be valued. Like, not one over another but included with one another."* Other students felt that the group format helped them learn balance and sharing. Terry (Group M) said, "*I thought this was enough room for people to be as vulnerable as they wanted to be. And, I think part of me was worried that it would become too vulnerable and people would overshare which can, sometimes, be uncomfortable when it takes over the class space. Umm, but it seemed like everyone was good at sharing enough but not too much."* April (Group G) agreed that conducting the class as a group helped to create safety and facilitate sharing. *"I was just going to say that it seemed like a healthy amount of sharing. I don't know how that was necessarily created. I don't know if that was the energy of the group or where everyone was at; but it was really important, specifically in social work classes, to learn that healthy amount and what that it is and what it means. That was felt in that class."*

Several students commented on how the conducting the class as a group contributed to safety and creation of a classroom which felt natural and conducive to authentic learning. Brian (Group G) said, *"There was a balance of laughter but then focusing in on what we needed to learn. An overall good balance."* Ron (Group G) supports this sentiment by saying, *"Yeah, it didn't feel like an assignment and that is the thing for me. I just felt like we were coming to group. It was just natural like that! I*

*didn't feel like I had to hit points."* The openness of this class was appreciated by the students. Students expressed concerns that conducting the class in a group format would result in the class becoming a therapy group. However, based on the input of an Indigenous student from the phase one interviews, I was conscious of setting appropriate boundaries. At the beginning of class, I informed the students that this class would be an educational, rather than a therapy, group. This verbiage ensured that although stories of lived experiences would be shared in order to help each other learn and grow, at no time would the class assume a therapeutic role. These boundaries ensured that the groups ran respectfully and democratically. As June (Group G) states, "*I also think when we were leading group and having that type of circle… was really respectful of the person facilitating. But I feel it was definitely respectful for the person facilitating. Everybody was accountable for their presence! I didn't feel like the need to be, 'Yeah, I agree with a lot of what people have been saying.' I think from the get go, we established a general feeling of respect and umm… and inclusion. And, like, some people like myself… I would have taken a little bit longer to cautiously feel out! But I was a lot quicker, than I would be relative to other classes, because I think people, the environment of sitting in a circle and being able to kind of, like, see people's non-verbal expressions, supporting and stuff. And, umm, and listening and holding that space respectfully. Like, there was a lot of times when I would go to speak but I can take longer sometimes… but I was given that time to speak. I appreciated that."*

## 6.5 Respect and Power

Feeling respected by, and maintaining respecting for, others was identified as key to feeling safe within the Sangat by its members. Foundational to the respect present within the Sangat are the relationships which exist between its members. Participants from phase one of my research study felt that the relationship between the professor and students was important for creating a safe space. By developing genuine relationships with their professor, students felt less anxious and more willing to demonstrate their authentic selves. Throughout my teaching career, I have always tried to develop relationships with my students by sharing stories of my lived experiences. Aware that my students appreciated these stories, I tried to incorporate more of them throughout the semester, with some success. As said by Shelley (Group M), "*I also like*

*how you humanize things, as in your examples in the field, just like you get anxious when stuff like this happens. It made it more humanizing."* Autumn (Group M) added, "*your stories always made them okay!… You cleared any mud; it was really passionate too and you're funny! Laughing with you about situations when you are sharing your own, like, okay, I may have had a panic attack once but, you know, you get over it… okay, that's great! I am like, 'okay, I am not the only one who does that!' You can laugh afterwards. That I really liked! I think that helped with creating warmth in the class too.*

Student participants from phase one talked about the importance of feeling respected in class. The students discussed feeling unsafe when professors used their power to make students feel inferior. When students spoke about the power professors held, I was reminded of my own precarious relationship with power in the classroom. This precariousness stood in contrast to my experience of the Gian Ji within the Gurdwara. Within the Gurdwara, the Gian Ji possesses the "power" of giving the Sangat members knowledge of the Sikhi teachings; however, when the Gian Ji is not "teaching", he becomes a member of the Sangat. Thus, I decided to incorporate this way of knowing in the classroom and use my "power" for the benefit of the collective.

The students talked about how things like language can invoke power: professors would use jargon that the students did not understand. There is pressure in Western academia to sound professional by using complex language. As a racialized student, I have had experienced feelings of confusion due to the language the professor was using. In order to develop authentic relationships, I decided to use relatable language. By being more relatable, my students have said that they feel they can be their authentic selves in the classroom. As Ron (Group G) states, "*I think it ultimately boils down to the instructor because if you have an instructor that is acting in an oppressive way, its not going to make a difference if you are in a circle or not!"*

Students stated that because I remain humble, the classroom feels safe and egalitarian. They do not feel inferior, nor intimidated, and, as such, are not afraid to show their authentic selves. Does my gender (a woman) with predominantly female students play a role in the creation of this non-threatening environment? Sally (Group G) states, *"I have had some experiences with professors that know that they are really knowledgeable and feel like, 'I am really knowledgeable, and I am going to teach you.'*

*But sometimes they use that knowledge base as a power. Maybe it's just the way I experienced it, but some people will use it as a power trip and they want you to know they have this breadth of experience and have done all these things… which is fantastic… but I don't think it was, sometimes, delivered in the best way. And I didn't find that with you. You are an incredibly knowledgeable person… you have a lot of experience in the field but you weren't like, you weren't using that like, 'I know this because I have been working in this field so long' or 'I know this because I have a Master's degree'. You were very much… we know you knew what you are talking about but it wasn't like in a mean, in a means to make us feel less safe."*

My practice of humility is demonstrated by my willingness to share power in the classroom. This practice is rooted in my Sikhi knowledge and is strengthened by practice of Seva. Raiya (Group M) demonstrated appreciation for this by saying, "*I think it is always responsibility of the person holding the power to diffuse it and I think you did a phenomenal job at diffusing that power by not bringing it in! It, like, oozes out of your aura that you are just one of us. Really!!! I came to expect the power difference but I couldn't. So, I really appreciate that."* Michelle (Group M) mirrored this comment by saying, *"I think a lot of that has to do with the passion that you bring to the classroom that kind of trickles down to the rest of us and it gives us cause. You have such a level playing field with all of your students! Makes us, sort of, feel like we can do this too."* My willingness to share power allowed students to demonstrate their authentic selves. As Raiya (Group M) says, *"the power is the hands of who has power. I think that you provided a lot of space for everybody to share authentically and only an instructor can do that! We think we know each other and we are able to do that! I think it's the person who runs that room who provides that space and be able to do that. I thought it was a very safe space without any power difference and that it is just amazing for a teacher to have."*

To my surprise, one of my students found it helpful that I used my power to help guide her. Terry (Group G) states "*I think the way you did use your power was really helpful! The one thing you said… one of the most helpful things I heard in school, was that your grades don't matter, you are going to graduate and you are going to get a job! And they are not going to care what your grades were. And, even getting into a Master's program, you need to have okay grades, you don't need to have straight A's. Just to stop worrying and more to embrace the learning process… which I thought was*

*a good use of your power as a person who is already employed to help us out."* This was one of many important learning moments for me: by using my power, I can help reduce the stress students feel when they contemplate their future practice.

Students also felt that empathetic demonstrations of power humanized the instructor. As April (Group G) said, *"as a prof, like you did, at the end of the day, you do have power. Like you did check in with yourself. I think that that is good… a professor… for you to check in with yourself because we don't think about that! I know I had a professor. She was joking with me in class and then emailed me after; which was really kind of her. I think her emailing me and checking in with me made me think, 'oh, she is human!'. That was really kind of her even though we were kidding."*

In addition to sense of parity, students said that being respectful of each other aided in the creation of a safe classroom. According to Autumn (Group M): "*One of the things I know about myself is I am very loud, and I know it. Honestly, everyone tells me I am so loud. I am like, 'I am not even that loud.' I think I might have a hearing problem. So that is something I try to work but it is hard. But, in the classroom too, I am like, I know I am loud so I am trying to talk and, even if I got loud, you were not like, 'shhh!' It is something that makes me anxious because I know I am doing it but can't stop, but I know I am doing it. It gave me space to be myself in that aspect. Even though, sorry if I scared anybody. But I am actually quiet at home."* Karen (Group M) also said feeling respected helped her to share: *"If I was to compare to other classes, the atmosphere was a lot different! I think your use of humour is a big thing too. There are times to be serious but I am uncomfortable in settings that are 100! Serious because you can't really be yourself."* Finally, Autumn (Group G) said that, *"I think by even saying things like, 'you guys are adults!', it inspired us to feel, or helped me to feel like, comfortable! I don't know to know! I don't know everything but I do know something. Also,… you sharing parts of yourself… helped me to feel more comfortable in doing that myself."*

Finally, providing students the opportunity and space for collaborating on the class structure aided in the creation of an environment which was safe and engaging. Shelley (Group M) said, *"I like that we collaborated too, about… at the beginning… breaks. It might be something so little but Fridays, to me, I don't even want to come to school; so, it made it more engaging and I appreciated you, that you considered our*

*thoughts."* The degree of freedom which students felt in the classroom was echoed by Belle (Group G) who said, *"I think you gave us a lot of space for us to most of the talking which was a new experience in a classroom which felt a bit weird at first cause we were like, 'Oh! We are not going to be listening to the professor telling us all of this and that. Was hard sometimes but I think it did create a lot of co-learning, which was really cool cause I don't know if I really experienced that much in other classes. So, and the circle again, was really helpful because we are not just staring at you, either, while all the other people are talking. Sometimes I forgot you were teaching the class but that was not a bad thing! I thought that was cool!"*

The openness students had in their ability to engage with me, as their professor, extended beyond the confines of the classroom. For example, Shelley (Group M) said, *"safe space will definitely be outside of the classroom. I mean, I felt messaging you five, six times in a row… because I knew that I was not going to get in trouble. But with some instructors, I knew I could not do that. That's the anxiety thing for me! I knew I was able to do that, whereas with other instructors, I would be more cautious."*

## 6.6 Dealing with Conflict

Students in phase one of my research discussed the importance of how the professor approached and dealt with conflict. At times, the students felt that professors did not set the tone for acceptable/unacceptable behavior. The students discussed experiences of racism, or disrespect of worldviews, in the classroom. They said that many times, professors would avoid conflict and not call on students who had uttered unacceptable comments. Admittedly, there have been times in the past that I have avoided calling out students. Although we did not experience conflict in either of my social work classes, I did challenge my students to explore events using a non-Western worldview. For example, Terry (Group G) said, *"when the one student proposed that new way of doing the group (brave space), and you told him at the end that you were not comfortable with that, I really appreciated that because it sort of modeled a way of saying, 'that is not ok', but in a way… a constructive way."* Terry's comment came after I expressed concern that introducing a concept, such as brave space, and adapting it to the group quickly, might result in less privileged students being feeling less empowered to speak up.

My concern was validated when a student in my social work class asked a group he was conducting if the concept of "brave space" should be used rather than the concept of "safe space". This question was asked with little time for deliberation; approval would be recognized by show of hands. All the White students raised their hands; however, not one of the racialized students (me included) raised theirs. By rule of majority, "brave space" was to be incorporated. Upon reflection, I realized that white students, already feeling safe, were quick to accept "brave space". In contrast, racialized students, having experienced spaces that lacked safety, were wary. Brian also commented on this: *"yeah, I thought it was an effective way of modelling certain sorts of boundaries. And, you did it from an angle where you said it was something you were questioning. It wasn't something you said, 'hey, this is not the way.' I found it was really mindful… really speaking to the inclusion of perspectives."* Thus, events which could have resulted in conflict were dealt with in a way which was respectful and democratic. "*We were super respectful of each other and even if there was disagreement there was never, I never felt that way. Respectful criticism.*" (Ron, Group G). When approaching potentially heated topics, Ron (Group G) added, "*I think the example of non-conflict was the group on ally-ship. Because that could potentially be a very emotional… and people can get defensive, but I think that was one of our best discussions because it was very respectful."*

Findings from phase 4 of my research confirmed for me that it is possible to create a safe and ethical space in the social work classroom. Though I had employed some of these ways of teaching previous to my research, I was unaware of the profound impacts that such diverse ways of knowing could have for my students. The comments made by my students were both enlightening and validating. Through this experience, I have grown as an educator, and as a person. I understand the responsibility and power I hold in crafting a safe and ethical space, and I realize that this is a journey which does not end. Finally, I am cognizant of the obligation I have to model the skills required to craft a safe and ethical space. I am ever more committed to addressing all of the myriad factors, including microaggressions and racist comments, which make a space unsafe for my students.

# 7 Final Thoughts

## 7.1 Lessons Learned

Before I embarked on my doctoral journey, I remember being told that completing a dissertation is like going through therapy. I thought this was amusing as, having had several years of experience working in the field of mental health, I did not see how writing a dissertation could be therapy. Now that I am at the end of my journey, I can attest that (though challenging and, at times, uncomfortable) completing a dissertation is, indeed, a form of self-therapy. Having to adopt autoethnography and practitioner inquiry methodology in order to complete my research resulted in significant self-reflection and self-transformation. Understanding how I could contribute to the creation of ethical and safe space for my Social Work students necessitated humbling myself and becoming the learner. I also had to reflect on my own experiences of the classroom, which were not always equitable or safe.

I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to develop mutually safe and supportive relationships with my students. By adopting a collective ideology and promoting an equitable classroom environment, my students felt safe in sharing their educational experiences, as well as their thoughts on crafting an ethical and safe space. Despite the Sangat being my ethical space, sitting down with fellow Sangat members to discuss the Sangat was both spiritually enlightening and uplifting. My experience of the Sangat validated, for me, the strength of having an ethical and safe space.

Although the concept of safe space in the social work classroom has previously been addressed by Garran and Rasmussen (2014) and Holly and Steiner (2005), this study is unique in that it provided the opportunity for a racialized Social Work professor to explore her own experiences through autoethnography, as well as the experiences of social work students, and then apply her findings to the classroom setting. This study also explored the concept of ethical space, which was then integrated in my approach to classroom teaching.

I have always found the construct of ethical space appealing. As a racialized student I have rarely found a space that I would consider ethical, and unfortunately, this applies to my career as a social worker as well. Given this, I believed that the ethical space was an unattainable ideal. However, my study does, I believe, offer insights that can help move us toward the creation of such a space. Roger Poole (1972) attests that the creation of safe and ethical space necessitates exploration of the divide existing between “two intentions”. Safe and ethical space cannot be created if we choose to examine only the students' or the professors' understanding of space. In this study, the participants and I engaged in genuine exploration of the space that exists between the students' and the professors' perspectives, and the authenticity which we brought to this space allowed us to engage in open and respectful conversation when our worldviews collided. Indeed there were times when it was difficult to engage in discussion as the worldview of the other stood in disagreement to the worldview of the self. Such dialogues held the power to cause hardship for the participants. Despite this, when such discussions occurred we were able to empathize with each other, resulting in positive change. In keeping with Battiste (2013), who cautioned that worldviews should not be considered by-products, we were able to craft a space based on different ways of knowing and within this space, the knowledge between different worldviews was acknowledged and respected.

Critically reflecting on my engagement with the students and the Sangat resulted in the distillation of three main learnings. In the remainder of this chapter, I will draw out these learnings, which I consider imperative to the creation of a safe ethical space in the social work classroom.

## 7.2 Lesson 1: Ethical Ideology Matters

When speaking of the Sangat, participants painted a picture of safety, respect, and belonging. Passion was evident in the words spoken by the members of the Sangat. Although this was unspoken, I sensed a yearning on the part of the Sangat members to experience such a space in other areas of their lives. The space not only offered them safety, it also contributed to their global well-being. When the tenets of Sangat were achieved, equality was apparent regardless of social location. Members were treasured for their differences and valued for the knowledge they possessed. This

contrasted with many BSW students, who clearly did not share a similar sense of belonging and validation. Rather, through their dialogue, the students expressed disappointment that their worldviews were not represented in the classroom, frustration due to experiences of microaggression, and insecurity due to the classroom failing to be a place of safety.

Creation of a safe ethical space in the Sangat is demonstrative of a single fundamental difference between the space in the university and the space in the Sangat. This fundamental difference pertains to the ideology of social relation. Specifically, through the collective cultural framing of Sikh teachings, in the Sangat the Ego (individual) is not considered to be the basic unit of value. In the Sangat, what matters is the creation and maintenance of a shared social space in which the worth of every member is equal. Western universities, conversely, continue to adhere to an individualistic and hierarchical philosophy within a neoliberal context. Although Western universities have made efforts to decrease inequalities resulting from this cultural mindset, the individualistic perspective continues to dominate. This observation points to the need for us to look at how we can create an ideology of equality and belonging in the classroom, and how Schools of Social Work might cultivate this ideology through their administrative processes, structures, and programming.

In the Sangat, various knowledges are recognized as being equally important to the well-being of the collective. Even though the Gian Ji is acknowledged as the knower of the religion, it is apparent that the knowledge of elders, friends, women, and young people is appreciated. These knowledges comprise the knowledge of the collective. In the Sangat, it is not important who has the most knowledge. Rather, what is important is how the knowledge is used for the betterment of the collective. In Western systems, the students are not seen as knowledge keepers in their own right; thus the transfer of knowledge is generally seen as one-way, from expert to student.

I wonder if the success and well-being of the collective can be shifted to a position of importance in the classroom? Is it possible for us to shift to a collective ideology within the Schools of Social work and classrooms? Such a shift would mean that students and professors would recognize the equality of knowledges that individuals bring to the classroom. Furthermore, students and professors, together, would use these knowledges in order to benefit the collective. If students were less

focused on their individual success, their attention would be shifted to that of the group. The professor would play a key role in ensuring the adoption of a collective rather than hierarchical philosophy. Such effort would benefit students who would be seen as equals and, therefore, be able to contribute to the social work curriculum. A foreseeable obstacle to completing this task is the inexperience of Western students with respect to existing within a collective ideology; nonetheless, the potential gains from a movement toward a collective ideology outweigh such inherent challenges.

This idea is reflective of the Sangat where everyone is welcome regardless of their social location. Regardless of what position you may hold, the way you sit and eat food is no different in comparison to anyone else. Having fancier clothes, or holding a more prestigious position, does not give you any advantage in where you sit, what you eat, or what value you have as a member. In this way, safety is created, as no one need worry about how their identity influences membership in the Sangat. In Western universities, success is influenced by the privilege an individual possesses. Faculty and students who have privilege are more likely to experience success, and the privilege of individuals does not equate to success of the collective. In the Sangat, success is realized when everyone works together to ensure that everyone achieves it. In addition, it's deeply ingrained in Western institutions that greater achievements should receive greater rewards, which leads to a systems for measuring outcomes. Unfortunately, these systems are build upon the Western ideology of individualism. How do we measure achievement and success in order for it to be advantageous to the collective rather than the individual?

In this study, I worked with the students to create a safe and ethical learning environment by incorporating collective ideology into my pedagogy. Through the use of circle seating and different ways of knowing, we were able to craft a safe and ethical space in which racialized and Indigenous students could be their whole authentic selves. Students who participated in phase one and four of this study felt safer when we adopted these class changes. Students from both of my classes, Social Work Groups and Social Work and Mental Health, reported feeling safer and more connected with each other. One example is that racialized and Indigenous students reported experiencing fewer microaggressions and racist comments when facing each other. Sitting in a circle, formatting the class as a group, and incorporating the Metissage assignment, led to the creation of a collective and inclusive environment in which

students were more accepting of other worldviews and more patient with each other. In the group class, each student had the opportunity to lead the class during the semester. By doing this, students were able to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, as well as assume a position of equality with their peers and instructor. I believe that the collective culture in which I was raised rendered me more sensitive and aligned with factors necessary to craft a safe and ethical class environment.

Despite the many elements I have identified which helped in the crafting of a safe and ethical space, failing to delineate the obstacles would be foolish. For example, although the circle-seating helped in the creation of ethical and safe space, the number of students in the classroom, the size of the classroom, and the desks and chairs made adopting circle-seating difficult. These obstacles are important for university administrators and professors to recognize as they explore better ways of promoting student engagement and authenticity in the classroom, especially for programs such as social work which call for a high degree of empathy and understanding. Certainly, implementing circle-seating can be challenging. At times prior to this study, I had my students move their chairs and desks into a circle each class. Although arranging the chairs in a circle increased student safety and engagement, some of the students complained on their course evaluations about this practice. Since these course evaluations determined my eligibility for teaching in the future, I decided to leave the chairs and desks organized in rows in the future. After completing this study, I now see the importance of making environmental changes, even if it does take extra time to move the furniture around. By making the importance of environmental changes known (explicitly) to the students, they are then emboldened and eager to help stage the classroom space. To help organize circle-seating, institutions can provide instructors with open-design classrooms which do not impede free movement. Furthermore, institutions can provide instructors with furniture which is uniform and easily moved (e.g. on wheels) in order to make rearrangement practical and efficient. Furthermore, professors can make students aware that circle-seating will be adopted so that they are not caught off-guard when they are asked to rearrange their desks and chairs.

Another barrier in establishing a safe and ethical space in the classroom is the implementation of a collective agreement. In general, at the onset of a social work course, I take the time to discuss class safety; specifically, I discuss with my students

the concept of privilege and acknowledgement of privilege. Over time, to my surprise, I have discovered that discussing privilege and having students understand privilege are different tasks. Though the concept of privilege is discussed openly in the social work classroom, there lies an apparent disconnect in its translation to practice. In a Race, Racialization and Immigration class, I was talking to the students about perceiving the world through a "White gaze". One of the White students said that he was having a hard time understanding the concept of White gaze. Later in the class, the same student shared a story of a racialized person who he found perplexing. Specifically, he was unable to comprehend the person's response when he offered to help. By dialoguing with the student about his experience, the student was able to come to the realization that he had made an assumption that the racialized individual needed his help; an assumption which could be attributed to the student holding a White gaze. The student was also able to realize that his disappointment in the racialized person's response could be attributed to his own interpretation of the situation through a White, rather than racialized, perspective. After class, the student approached me and thanked me for explaining and helping him apply the concept of the White gaze to his example. That the student had difficulty understanding the concept of the White gaze prior to the discussion illustrates the difficulty students often have in being able to put recognition of privilege into practice.

Perhaps this disconnect represents an opportunity of significance as students can be taught to apply critical theoretical concepts. My experience as a student has taught me that social work teachings are often delivered abstractly in the university setting. When examples of concepts are given, they are usually taken from the personal experience of the instructor. Perhaps it is more important that students are able to decipher their experiences through their own learnings. This may also entail professors bringing more of themselves into the class and stepping away from the ego. This may represent a tricky task for many racialized and non-racialized professors. To minimize the complexities inherent in such a task, professors must take the time to establish an environment of inclusion and safety at the beginning of the semester.

Although professors play a role in crafting a safe ethical space, without the undivided integrity of the academy, there can be no realization of ethical ideological matters. Thus, within the academy, tools and supports which aid in the creation of safety must be provided indispensably and different ways of knowing must be

championed unremittingly.  Recognized concretely, program admission and student orientation must consciously include apropos responsibilities and expectations at the onset of the social work program.  For example, as commitment and dedication to self-exploration of inherent privilege and bias is often recognized as vital to social work competency, upon admission to a social work program, students should be challenged, explicitly and irrefutably, to examine their privilege, social location, and bias.  Thus, it is an institutional responsibility to ensure that the unwritten oath students take to establish a safe and ethical space is clearly communicated and upheld at the commencement of their social work journey.

Beyond the institution, it is important that the Social Work Code of Ethics (SWCE) guide social workers in the implementation of ethical practice.  Fortunately, the Canadian Association of Social Work introduced an updated SWCE in 2024.  This update, the first since 2005, was a response to criticisms that the SWCE failed to acknowledge racism and colonialism.  Resonating with my research are two core values including "Respecting the Dignity and Worth of All People" and "Pursuing Truth and Reconciliation" (CASW, 2024).  In respecting the former, the new guidelines make it clear that social workers should not only advocate for the human rights of all individuals, groups, and communities, they must also validate the contributions of others (CASW, 2024).  This reflects my learnings that the world views of all must be respected, as must contributions to social work from different ways of knowing.

In emphasizing that social workers must uphold the guiding principles outlined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's report, the new guidelines also speak to the need for institutional and systemic changes in education (CASW, 2024). Thus, while social work itself needs to contribute to reconciliation in Canadian society more broadly, institutional changes ensuring equality of Indigenous students and faculty in educational spaces must be demanded by professors of social work.

## 7.3  Lesson 2: Diversity of WorldViews Matters

The Sangat, and the physical environment associated with it, the Gurudwara, represents a safe and ethical space for myself and for others.  When I step into the Gurudwara, I am transported from a world in which the Western perspective is

dominant into a world in which Sikh ideology is ascendant. This experience of passing into a space where different rules apply adds to my experience of comfort and safety; I am able to practice in accordance with my perspective. In this world, my perspective is respected and honoured as equal to other worldviews. This is a state of affairs we should be aiming for in our educational institutions as well.

Reflecting on my journey through the Western education system, I understand how the dominance of the Euro-Western ideologies contributed to my feelings of discomfort. My perspective was not acknowledged as equal. For example, as a child in primary school, I was forced to recite a Christian prayer. We were not allowed to opt out of this. As a Sikh, I felt demoralized by the school's unwillingness to recognize my religion. Being forced to recite the Christian prayer made me feel alienated and alone. Furthermore, curriculum, stories, and holidays were all based on the Euro-Western (Christian) way of being. This resulted in my life becoming a dichotomy as I lived an Eastern lifestyle at home and a Western lifestyle at school. Essentially, the education system impressed on me a sense of the Western way as 'normal' and the non-Western way as inferior (the 'other').

My experience of university (Bachelor of Social Work program) was far better than my earlier education. However, the Euro-Western worldview continued to be the dominant worldview. Although the professors tried to apply an anti-oppressive lens to the curriculum (including readings), Social Work was practiced from a Euro-Western perspective. For example, we approached the topic of client diversity through a privileged lens. As noted by Hart (2003), social work education continues to be viewed from a 'White social worker' lens. This reinforced my experience of internalized racialization and feelings of being the 'other'. When we discussed the topic of diverse people, the focus was on the diversity of the clients rather than on that of social workers. I did not realize until much later that, many times, I was thinking of myself as a client during these discussions rather than a social worker, as this was more relatable. We did not have the opportunity to learn how to approach Social Work practice as a racialized social worker as the majority of the students and professors came from the dominant ideology.

When I went into the workforce as a racialized social worker, I was prepared for working with diverse people. However, I was not prepared for the experience of being

a diverse social worker. I remember that when I started working on the psychiatric ward as a social worker, I was assigned to an older gentleman in his 70's. During our morning rounds, I was told that he did not want a coloured social worker and he would like to be assigned to the White social worker. I remember not knowing how to react to the situation. It was not something we had discussed in the program. I remember the staff feeling we should just comply with his wishes, without thinking about how the racism impacted me as a person.

As part of my inquiry, I reflected on how students who adhere to the Western worldview felt safe and validated in the classroom, yet the racialized students and Indigenous students were missing their worldviews. Although the need for integration of Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods has been identified in the Truth and Reconciliation Report (2015, p.7), and decolonization of educational institutions has also been recommended in the CASWE-ACFTS Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards, these changes are still a work in progress. Although these recommendations are not new to Social Work professors, putting them into practice in a Euro-Western university can be a challenge.

During my 19 years of teaching, I have had, at most, three colleagues who were racialized. Often times, I was the only racialized professor in the social work faculty. Unfortunately, many university programs continue to be represented by faculty with few racialized members and little appreciation of different worldviews. It is not acceptable to have only a single token professor on faculty to represent racial diversity, as it is recognized that racialized faculty require the support of other racialized faculty to feel safe in the workplace. Moreover, a concentrated effort should be made to incorporate equality of racialized and Indigenous voices in the readings of each course in the program. Finally, when racialized faculty feel slighted by privileged students, the department must be willing to stand by the racialized faculty and address the action perpetrated by the student. Failure to address acts of racism and microaggression can result in racialized faculty feeling othered, powerless, and less willing to remain as faculty of the program.

The hegemony of the Western worldview in programs and universities is prolonged by failure to incorporate different worldviews in the delivery of the curriculum. To counter this dominance, Western universities must make a concerted effort to

incorporate different ways of knowing as important and valued dimensions of the learning experience. In addition to place, identified by several Indigenous students as critical in the crafting of safe space, both spirituality and collective ideology (prominent aspects of the Sangat) were recognized in our discussions as important ingredients. Many of the Indigenous students commented on the physical building reflecting colonial power. As such, they preferred to have their classes outside of brick and motar buildings. The desire for outdoor teaching was echoed by both racialized and White students. This echoes the importance of 'place' in our teachings. If we, as educators, choose to integrate different worldviews in our teaching, then it is important that this we reflect this in our entire pedagogy. For this to be achieved, we must build relationships with our Indigenous Nations and be receptive to Indigenous ways of knowing. This knowledge may enable us to understand the significance of, and protocols for, incorporating space into our learning environment.

## 7.4 Lesson 3: Awareness of Racialization Matters

As I reflected on my journey through the various education systems and listened to the students and Sangat members, it became obvious to me that race does matter when thinking of safety. The effects of racialization creates many barriers to people feeling safe in the educational system. This is not only true for students but also for the professors. From the start of my educational journey, race was a contributing factor in feeling unsafe in the classroom. Whether the racism was over or covert, it still made me feel othered and silenced my voice. As I remained silent, I also started to internalize the racialization. As I progressed to the University setting, although the overt racism declined the covert racism remained. Even my BSW studies continued to fuel my internalized racism as the material continue to be presented from a White gaze.

*I still remember a seminar we had for our practicum in our fourth year of studies in the BSW. All of the 4th years were gathered for the seminar in a very large room at TRU. The professor asked us to complete a Myers-Briggs Inventory. A simple way of describing this inventory is that it asks many questions to determine whether you are an extrovert or introvert. I remember completing this inventory as honestly as I could, as we were told it would help us with the practicum. When we all had our results, the professor asked us to split into the Introvert and Extrovert groups. As I headed to the*

*extrovert group, she loudly wondered if I was in the right group. As, I think back to this example, it provides a concrete example of how the education system silenced me and although I identified as an extrovert, the system made me appear introverted. There is nothing wrong with being introverted if that is one's whole self, however, it is different, if you become an introvert based on the environment not making you feel safe. Although students or professors may outwardly look "safe" in an environment, they may not be their whole selves, which is what happened to me. I can honestly say that I was never my whole self in the education system because of feeling unsafe.*

It was interesting that during my dialogue with the Sangat members, race was not a barrier in creating safety, as we all belonged to the same socially constructed race group. Therefore, we did not feel discrimination because of the colour of our skin. I believe this is one of the factors that led to us feeling safe and being able to be our whole selves. Unfortunately, this was not the same experience for the students in the classroom setting. I listened to the racialized and Indigenous students speak to the microaggressions they faced in their studies. Because they belonged to racial groups that were seen as outside the norms of Whiteness, race became a major barrier in feelings of safety. Not only that, but as a racialized professor, I too, continue to face micro aggressions from students and others.

*One evening, while teaching the Working with Diverse Populations class, I explained to the students that, as a racialized woman, I am conscious of what I say and when. To illustrate this point, I told the class about an experience I had travelling to New York. Prior to going on this trip, my husband (who is also racialized) and I talked to our daughter (7 years old at the time) about avoiding racially charged conversations. We decided to have this talk as racial aggressions were, at the time, prevalent in the United States. One evening in New York, we decided to go for coffee at Starbucks. Prompted by the staff, my daughter started to order her drink. My daughter was unaware that there was a couple waiting in line in front of us as they had stepped away from the counter. As soon as my daughter started to order, the couple got upset. Despite having stepped out of line, they were mad that our daughter had budged ahead. I tried to explain to the couple that my daughter did not realize that they were there. A White woman butted into the conversation stating that "some foreigners" have no respect. My husband and I stayed quiet.*

*I told the class that during the incident, I was cognizant of being a racialized woman and felt it best to stay quiet. A White student put her hand up right away and said, "I would have said something even if I was brown." At that moment, I felt 'othered' by the student. I did not want to ignore this comment; however, I realized that responding to this comment required empathy and sensitivity. I replied to the student, "I don't think you would have said anything if you were brown!" Then I opened up this discussion to other racialized and Indigenous students. "What do others think?" I asked. The racialized and Indigenous students agreed that they would have remained silent in that situation. Some of the students gave examples of similar situations that they had experienced in their lives. I thought I had done the right thing, until another challenge was thrown in.*

*The same White student raised her hand and said, "I guess the White students shouldn't say anything in class then." I decided to use this interjection as a teaching opportunity. I replied, "I think this conversation is very important and I am glad you said something. Let's break this down a little further. I am a racialized woman with 20 years of experience as a social worker and 15 years as a social work instructor. I am a strong advocate for social change and quite vocal." This provided context for what I would say next: "You are a fourth-year social work student, a strong advocate for change and quite vocal. You would have said something, yet I wouldn't. What do you think the difference is?" The class was quiet, so I continued, "White Privilege." I waited to see what the response would be. The White students raised their hands. One of the students discussed the White privilege she had while travelling that summer. Another student described the time he visited a South American country and experienced White privilege over the locals.*

Although I was successful in redirecting this student and providing the class with a learning opportunity, as a racialized woman I was triggered by the student's remarks. I also felt vulnerable in my internalized racialization. Specifically, I was worried that applying an anti-racist approach with this student would challenge her privilege and result in a negative course evaluation.

Even though race does matter, it continues to be minimized in our Universities, programs and classrooms. It is still the racialized students and racialized professors who have to point out the racism that we face in these settings. We continue to see a

lack of race-aware course content, worldviews, students or professors and leaders within the University settings. White researchers continue to be the main researchers in projects about racialized people, while a racialized person is asked to join more for PR than as the leader of the project. A friend of mine once told me that they are tired of only being offered certain courses as a racialized professor rather than being asked to teach any course they want. It speaks to being recognized as a racialized person first rather than an academic.

*Recently, I was invited to present to TRU international students on the topic of mental health. At first, I was honoured to be asked to present. However, the request was that I present as someone with lived experience of being an international student. I immediately felt confusion, and then sadness in the face of this microaggression. I wondered why the committee would not have taken time to know who I am before inviting me to present. I wondered if I was invited as a token "racialized" woman rather than for my experience of being a Mental Health Leader for the past 17 years.*

Although the committee did subsequently apologize for what may have seemed like a harmless assumption, this microaggression exemplifies the challenges faculty of colour face on a daily basis in the university setting. Many times, we stay quiet in the face of these microaggressions because when we do speak up about these challenges, we are perceived as being angry or complainers rather than anti-racists and social advocates.

Non-tolerance of racism and microaggressions in the university environment is often delegated to a position of lip service. Though non-tolerance is often positioned as a concern of utmost importance, students and faculty identify examples of both overt and covert racism occurring on a regular basis. If university do not address such assaults at an institutional level, racism and microaggressions become an accepted practice. As such, I suggest that institutions enforce, rather then merely introduce, policies aimed at policing racial discrimination. Institutions must take seriously professors' and students' reports of racist acts experienced on campus. Furthermore, racialized professors should have access to a support group in which they can safely debrief, find mutual support, and inform the university on ways which racism can be confronted. I would also find it appropriate that students in different programs should

be able to find such groups.  These groups could substantially contribute to informing the university on issues of and approaches to safety and ethicality for students.

This study was therapeutic for me to understand the impact of racialization on my educational journey.  In addition, I was able to recognize the heaviness I still feel in having to deal with microaggressions and racialization as a professor.  It is a relief to have a safe place, the Sangat, where racialization is not a factor to contend with; however, most of my time is spent in spaces where racialization continues to be an oppressive force.  I am starting to recognize that the internalized racialization not only holds me back from being my whole self, but burdens me with having to deal with it constantly.  Although racialization will not be eliminated easily, it does help to be able to name it and talk about it in the context of my work.

## 7.5 Concluding Thoughts

Although this study was very informative for me, and provided good insight into students' experiences in the classroom, it was not without its limitations.  As a small qualitative study, its implications for other social work educators and racialized faculty may be more suggestive than definitive. However, the strong congruence of the students' reported experiences with my own educational journey and observations suggests that the underlying issues of safety, equality, belonging, and cultivating ethical space in the classroom are real, enduring, and important. Likewise, although my experiences of the Sangat and conversations with Sangat members offer only a small window onto the ways in which safe space is cultivated in the Sikh community, those insights added a helpful dimension to my thinking in this study.

This study explored social work students in a relatively small city of some 100,000 people.  In a bigger city with more diverse students and faculty, some of these findings may have been different. Moreover, university programs are always evolving. To be fair, there have several progressive steps taken since I was a student in the TRU BSW program, and there may have been more since I completed this research. However, the work is ongoing as we continue to dismantle colonial and racist policies and structures in social work. More research is needed to help guide us on this journey.

As a racialized women completing a study involving autoethnography and practitioner inquiry, I recognize that my experiences may not be the same as someone from a different social location and worldview. I believe it is important to understand the lived experience of a diverse range of racialized professors, both in terms of their safety in the classroom setting and with regard to their experience of their own safe spaces and how those teachings can be integrated into the classroom setting. There is also so much to share on how to further develop, and implement, ethicality and safety in the classroom. To promote the best learning of future social work practitioners, educators must be cognizant in their integration of different worldviews throughout their pedagogy and curriculum. More importantly, we need to recognize that the colonial approach to teaching social work can work no longer in a community which is becoming more diverse. Indeed, social work educators must recognize that increasing diversity in the student pool means that future social workers are likely to hold non-Western worldviews. I hope that my research makes a small but positive contribution to developing new conceptions and practices of social work education in which a range of worldviews can be welcomed, cherished, and shared.

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