Technische Universität Dresden

Safe Space or Brave Space? Gender Diversity in Catholic Schools

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A fictional case inspired by real cases, situated in the context of German teacher education.

School Context and Setting

Sankt-Thomas-Gymnasium is a private Catholic school with approximately 600 students on the eastern outskirts of Dresden and one of only a few Catholic schools in Saxony. Sponsored by the Diocese of Dresden-Meißen, the school is academically respected and locally rooted. Its Catholic identity shapes daily life and how the school sees itself, influencing teaching and school life as well as the expectations placed on students and staff.

This character is particularly notable in Saxony, one of the most secular regions in the world and an area where the Catholic Church remains socially marginal. In this context, Sankt-Thomas-Gymnasium represents a visible exception: a place where faith is an integral and public part of the institution. The school is highly regarded and attracts families for different reasons, including its religious profile and strong sense of community.

A rainbow flag on the building symbolizes the school's inclusive approach to diversity. However, it has also drawn sharp criticism. Some time ago, right-wing alternative media reported on the "Catholic rainbow school," and the resulting online backlash occupied the school community for several weeks. This controversy reflects the polarized climate: the Saxon AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*), which Saxony's domestic intelligence agency classifies as a right-wing extremist party, won nearly 30% of the vote in Dresden and nearly 40% in Saxony in the 2025 federal election. AfD currently polls even higher.

Scene 1: Friday Morning

[1] We made use of large language models to assist with the wording (in particular you.com). For substantive feedback, we thank Justin Hauver and the project team of "Teaching.Democracy," especially Tanja Berning.

The morning light streamed through the stained-glass windows of Sankt-Thomas-Gymnasium as the school bell rang. Peter Leifeld had been teaching German and Religion at the school since the summer. He enjoyed his work and hoped for a permanent position. After his free period, Mr. Leifeld greeted his students warmly at the classroom door. Having completed his teacher traineeship (*Referendariat*) at another Dresden school, he was now a homeroom teacher (*Klassenlehrer*) for the first time.

Today, he was teaching his eighth-grade class a religion unit he had taught before: the Christian view of humanity, human dignity, and individual identity. The students worked in groups with the biblical text on Genesis 1, which addresses divine creation and the Christian understanding of humanity. Mr. Leifeld wanted to create an open and welcoming atmosphere for everyone in the class.

Given the topic and what he knew about the class, he paid particular attention to Ray, a new student who had recently transferred from another school. Earlier, Ray had confided in Mr. Leifeld: About a year ago, he had transitioned to the male gender. Ray had mentioned that he was especially happy that his gender identity was finally listed correctly on his ID card and that he no longer had to explain himself all the time. Ray asked Mr. Leifeld to keep this confidential. Mr. Leifeld also knew that Ray had initially been skeptical about attending a Catholic school—after all, some Catholic groups in Dresden are often involved in campaigns against gender diversity. However, positive reports about dedicated teachers at the school ultimately convinced Ray and his parents.

Scene 2: Friday Morning – Debate in the Classroom

After the group work, the class shared and compared their results. At the end of the lesson, Mr. Leifeld asked a general question to spark a debate and help students apply what they had learned:

"From a biblical perspective, every person has inherent dignity because each of us is a child of God and made in God's image. Do you think this applies unconditionally—no matter what people say or do?"

Mr. Leifeld quickly noticed that the atmosphere in the class was more tense than during the presentation phase. Soon, students connected his question to the debate around gender diversity. This was likely also because the well-known feminist Alice Schwarzer was scheduled to present her new book in Dresden that weekend. Schwarzer's appearance was controversial; critics had accused J. K. Rowling of promoting trans-exclusionary feminism, and Schwarzer faced similar accusations[2].

Elisabeth and Nathanael, both from Catholic families, passionately defended traditional values. Elisabeth was a member of the Bonifatiuskreis, a local diocesan youth group whose parish still celebrates Mass according to the old Latin Tridentine Rite. Both regularly provoked strong reactions from their more liberal classmates, such as Fiete and Lotta, who spoke up for gender diversity and human rights in their neighborhood. The exchange revealed a divide not just between secular and religious perspectives, but between conservative and progressive religious outlooks. On one side were traditional interpretations of Catholic values that emphasize conformity to the natural order as ordained by God; on the other were more liberal, inclusive interpretations that prioritize individual self-determination and gender diversity.

As these two camps became more pronounced and moderate voices grew quieter, Elisabeth raised her hand. Her voice was careful, almost gentle, but what she said made Mr. Leifeld listen closely:

"I share the view that every person is a child and image of God and therefore has inherent dignity. But as Catholics we must not forget that all human beings are also sinners. So, I find it strange that some people, so-called queer people, today seem to believe they can simply reinvent their identity from scratch as if identity were something you could pick like a jacket, rather than something God has given us as a gift. Pope Francis himself has warned against the dangers of "gender ideology," and German bishops also consider lived homosexuality a sin."

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[2] Alice Schwarzer (https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/alice-schwarzer-im-schauspielhaus-hamburg-mehrere-personen-stuermen-buehne-waehrend-lesung-a-c2bb9a4c-0df7-4e5b-8c2b-3fc9d807e0a4) and J. K. Rowling (https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-64729304) have both faced accusations of trans-exclusionary feminism. Their positions illustrate how second-wave feminist convictions can conflict with contemporary gender-identity discourse.

Several students shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Nathanael grinned. In the front row, Fiete put down his pen, visibly angry. Lotta briefly closed her eyes and whispered something to her neighbor. Ray had remained very still throughout the discussion. Ever since Elisabeth had begun speaking, he had kept his eyes on his materials, without writing anything or showing any other reaction.

Mr. Leifeld wanted to respond to the mood he perceived in the classroom, but then the bell rang. As the students were already getting up, he said:

"That is a remarkable comment, and one we really ought to explore further. Your concerns, Elisabeth, are shared by other Catholics, but your position is also controversial in our democracy and within the Catholic Church itself. Let's see—perhaps we'll find a few minutes in the next lesson to come back to it."

With the bell ringing and the class already noisily leaving, Mr. Leifeld realized that the debate had not ended with the lesson. The tensions that had surfaced in the classroom would likely return on Monday, perhaps even more intensely after Alice Schwarzer's upcoming book presentation and the protests expected around it.

Scene 3: Friday Noon – Mr. Leifeld's difficult reflection

After the last students had left, Mr. Leifeld closed the door. Thoughtfully, he made his way toward the staff room. Down the hall, he saw Ray knocking on the door of the school social worker, Jette Brinkmann. As Ray opened the door and went in, he glanced back briefly. Ray's reaction, along with the mood in the whole class, showed Mr. Leifeld just how charged the topic of gender diversity was, not only in Dresden's public sphere but in his own classroom. He was unsure whether and how to revisit the topic in the next lesson. But his announcement had bought him time. Since the topic of the Christian image of humanity is anchored in the curriculum, Elisabeth's comment might offer a timely, real-world opportunity to engage students' interests constructively. The discussion could help to prepare them for the "real world" outside school, where they will encounter a wide range of views.

At the same time, he wondered whether the topic was too sensitive, whether it might divide the class or cause visible discomfort in students like Ray. Are such topics too personal for the

classroom? And how should he handle the fact that he had his own fairly clear opinion, one that directly contradicted Elisabeth's? For him, there is a difference between choosing an identity and discovering a God-given one. From his Catholic perspective, identity is not static or fixed; it develops in and through human relationships. He is, for example, open to blessing queer people in his parish.

Shouldn't students like Elisabeth be confronted at school with the fact that their strong convictions can be legitimately challenged—that even their own teacher, as a Catholic, holds a markedly different view from theirs and from the Pope's? And isn't it also important to prepare Ray for a society in which such debates are conducted daily—would it be a mistake for the school to shield him from difficult topics? Yet he also weighed the opposite risk: is there not a real danger of putting students like Ray in a situation that feels personally invasive?

But could he truly keep himself from unduly influencing what all of his students think? He thought especially of three struggling students who depended on a good grade in Religion and who had, more than once, seemed to repeat his opinion rather than express their own.

Scene 4: Friday Afternoon – Conversation in the Staff Room

Mr. Leifeld was alone in the staff room, working through urgent tasks as he usually did on Fridays. Not just the school day but the entire school week was over. By now he was usually looking forward to the weekend, but today's debate still weighed on him. As he sorted through papers, Ms. Brinkmann, the school social worker, came in and quietly closed the door behind her.

"Do you have a moment?" she asked. Mr. Leifeld nodded.

"I spoke with Ray today," Ms. Brinkmann began calmly. "He seemed pretty shaken by the discussion in your lesson."

Mr. Leifeld raised his eyebrows. "Yes, I was afraid the situation would be uncomfortable for him."

Ms. Brinkmann sat down across from him. "I wanted you to know that Ray opened up to me,

and he told me he had already confided in you about his transition. At the same time, he's very reserved about personal conversations with teachers. Even though he likes you, Peter, he won't tell you directly what he really thinks and feels. At least, that's my impression."

Ms. Brinkmann explained that Ray saw the move to a new school as a genuine fresh start—a chance to simply be Ray and to shape the perception of his own identity on his own terms. She continued: "Ray has made it very clear that he doesn't want to be outed. His story shouldn't become a topic of conversation or speculation. He wants to be treated like any other student. He's also afraid of being excluded and bullied again if his transition becomes public. The situation at his old school had become so difficult that Ray often stayed at home and missed class. He's finally found his footing here, and I'd really like us to do everything we can to make sure it never gets that far again."

Ms. Brinkmann stressed that Ray seemed genuinely burdened by today's classroom debate. She felt the situation demanded a response. With that, she stood up, wished Mr. Leifeld a pleasant weekend, and added as a parting remark:

"Oh, Peter—one more thing. You're probably familiar with the new Self-Determination Act (*Selbstbestimmungsgesetz*), aren't you? Bear in mind: nowadays an unwanted outing can result in a fine up to 10,000 EUR."

Scene 5: Friday Evening – Mr. Leifeld's Apartment

Mr. Leifeld lived alone in a small apartment in Dresden's Neustadt district. By the time he got home, it was already dark. The apartment was quiet—the kind of quiet that follows a day filled with the noise of school. He sat at the kitchen table, poured himself a glass of wine, but barely touched it. His lesson planner lay open in front of him, but he stared right through it.

He thought of Ray, of the classroom debate, and of the conversation with Ms. Brinkmann. Although he had taught the unit on human dignity and identity before and had a sense of which texts worked and which questions generated real discussion, he was genuinely uncertain in this situation—partly because he didn't know exactly what the law required, what parents, colleagues, and the principal expected of him, or which decision he could justify from an educational standpoint.

How should he approach the topic in a class with students like Elisabeth, Ray, and Lotta, each of whom brought a different perspective to the debate and pushed it in challenging directions? He weighed the cost of omission: wouldn't he be squandering a genuine learning opportunity if he set aside Elisabeth's comment in the next lesson? Would he be signaling to students who found the topic compelling and wanted to discuss it that their interests didn't matter to him? Would he be wasting a golden opportunity to bring a dry curricular topic to life and foster students' ethical, religious, and political judgment in a lasting way?

Mr. Leifeld was clear on one thing: his teaching should not avoid difficult questions or shield students intellectually; it should challenge them to think. But he also understood the classroom as a safe space for everyone—a place where students should feel as comfortable as possible, precisely so that they feel free to speak up.

But he also wondered whether sharing his view in the short Religion lessons would take up too much airtime—in those lessons, rarely more than half the students managed to speak at all. And could he really credibly signal that students like Elisabeth are also welcome at the school? Would it perhaps be better, after all, to avoid the topic entirely? Wasn't there even a real danger that he might trigger a new social media backlash for the school, or attract the attention of the local AfD chapter, which could file a complaint with the school authority on grounds of lack of neutrality? As a contracted teacher still seeking permanent status, he would very much prefer to avoid such trouble.

Yet he was also uncertain whether he could avoid the debate in the next lesson at all. Wasn't it quite possible that the Friday dynamics, amplified by Alice Schwarzer's book event, would resurface in the next lesson regardless of how he behaved as a teacher?

As these questions kept circling in his mind, exhaustion set in. He heard faint music drifting in from the Neustadt outside, but otherwise the apartment was quiet. The lesson planner still lay open in front of him. He went to bed, exhausted.

What should Mr. Leifeld do?

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