

The Safety Paradox: Informal Peer Networks and the Culture of Silence in Indonesian International Schools

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Abstract: Psychological safety is widely recognized as a foundational component of high-functioning organizational behavior; however, its distribution within complex educational ecosystems is rarely uniform. This study investigates a critical psychosocial phenomenon termed the "Safety Paradox" affecting expatriate teachers within Indonesia's Satuan Pendidikan Kerjasama (SPK) schools. The paradox delineates a workplace environment wherein educators exhibit exceptionally high levels of interpersonal, horizontal trust with their peers, yet experience pervasive vertical mistrust and insecurity regarding their institutional leadership. Employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design, empirical data was gathered from a diverse cohort of 113 expatriate educators deployed across multiple Indonesian regions. The primary objective was to evaluate the localized dimensions of psychological safety and map the directional flow of trust utilizing the Input-Process-Output (IPO) framework. Quantitative descriptive analysis revealed a statistically significant dichotomy: while overall psychological safety appeared moderately robust (Mean 3.56), "Peer Trust and Respect" scored exceptionally high (Mean 3.70), standing in stark contrast to critically low scores in "Institutional Policy Support" (Mean 2.74). Furthermore, institutional precarity severely compromised "Mistake Tolerance" (Mean 3.42) and "Interpersonal Risk-Taking" (Mean 3.45). To interpret these statistical variances, a thematic analysis of qualitative responses was conducted. The findings suggest that expatriate educators proactively utilize grassroots, informal peer networks as a defensive "bunker mentality" to mitigate the precarity of vague contracts, inconsistent administrative directives, and punitive leadership paradigms. Consequently, SPK schools suffer from a systemic "culture of silence," wherein professional vulnerabilities are concealed rather than collaboratively resolved. The study concludes that high staff cohesion, when functioning as a shield against management, is a symptom of organizational dysfunction rather than health. Fostering authentic psychological safety remains a strategic imperative for SPK schools, necessitating a paradigm shift toward restorative leadership practices and formalized institutional accountability to ensure long-term educator retention and operational efficacy.

Keywords: Psychological Safety, Safety Paradox, Expatriate Teachers, Organizational Culture, School Leadership, Indonesia.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid globalization of education has exponentially increased the demand for expatriate teachers in international schools. However, operating within cross-cultural pedagogical environments exposes these educators to profound psychosocial challenges, including cultural dissonance, emotional labor, and systemic inequities (Almutawa and Alsuwailan, 2025; Jalilzadeh et al., 2024). Within this high-stakes context, psychological safety—defined as the shared belief that an individual will not be punished, marginalized, or humiliated for expressing ideas, asking questions, or admitting mistakes—is a critical

prerequisite for organizational learning and educator retention (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017).

Despite its established importance, psychological safety is rarely monolithic across an organization. This study identifies a localized psychosocial dynamic termed the "Safety Paradox" within Indonesia's Satuan Pendidikan Kerjasama (SPK) schools. This paradox emerges when expatriate educators perceive high levels of horizontal safety (peer-to-peer trust) simultaneously with acute vertical precarity (mistrust of school management and institutional policies). While collegial support is ostensibly beneficial, contemporary organizational psychology suggests that when

peer networks function primarily as defensive mechanisms against institutional unpredictability, they can inadvertently foster a "culture of silence" (Itzhakov et al., 2023). This study aims to deconstruct this paradox, investigating how institutional instability undermines systemic psychological safety, thereby restricting interpersonal risk-taking and pedagogical innovation among expatriate teachers.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To capture the multidimensional nature of organizational trust, a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design was employed. The study population comprised 113 expatriate educators currently employed in SPK schools across multiple regions in Indonesia, ensuring a demographically and geographically representative sample.

In the initial quantitative phase, a validated survey instrument was administered to measure specific domains of Psychological Safety and Workplace Challenges on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree/Rarely Experienced, 5 = Strongly Agree/Frequently Experienced). The quantitative

data was subjected to descriptive statistical analysis (Means and Standard Deviations) to establish empirical baselines for peer trust, institutional support, and mistake tolerance.

The subsequent qualitative phase involved the collection of open-ended survey responses to interrogate the statistical findings. This textual data underwent rigorous thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to identify recurring psychosocial coping mechanisms and communication barriers. The analytical integration of both data sets was framed utilizing the Input-Process-Output (IPO) model, mapping how structural inputs (e.g., institutional policies) directly dictate group processes (e.g., peer networking) and ultimately define organizational outputs (e.g., silence, retention, and performance).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative analysis exposed a pronounced dichotomy in the distribution of trust within SPK schools, empirically substantiating the existence of the Safety Paradox.

Table 1: Dimensional Analysis of Psychological Safety and Institutional Trust

Domain of Safety / Trust	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Descriptive Interpretation
Peer Trust and Respect	3.70	0.82	High Level (Robust Horizontal Safety)
Overall Psychological Safety	3.56	0.75	Moderate-High Level
Interpersonal Risk-Taking	3.45	0.88	Moderate Level (Vulnerable)
Mistake Tolerance	3.42	0.91	Moderate Level (Vulnerable)
Institutional Policy Support	2.74	0.95	Low Level (Severe Vertical Precarity)

Legend: Means calculated based on a 5-point Likert scale. The variance between Peer Trust (3.70) and Institutional Support (2.74) delineates the parameters of the Safety Paradox.

As delineated in Table 1, expatriate teachers reported robust horizontal safety, prioritizing "Peer Trust and Respect" (Mean 3.70). However, this interpersonal security is systematically undermined by profound institutional precarity, as evidenced by the critical deficit in "Institutional Policy Support" (Mean 2.74). Furthermore, dimensions requiring vertical vulnerability—such as "Mistake Tolerance" (Mean 3.42) and "Interpersonal Risk-Taking" (Mean 3.45)—scored substantially lower than peer cohesion, indicating a latent fear of administrative retaliation.

To elucidate the behavioral consequences of these numerical disparities, thematic analysis of the qualitative data identified two primary organizational phenomena:

Table 2: Thematic Categorization of Organizational Coping Mechanisms

Qualitative Theme	Theoretical Description	Empirical Evidence (Participant Context)
The Bunker Mentality (Defensive Cohesion)	Teachers cultivate informal, grassroots peer networks not merely for collaborative pedagogy, but as a strategic shield against unreliable or inconsistent administrative directives.	Colleagues are utilized as secondary information exchanges to decode opaque institutional policies, bypassing formal managerial channels.
The Culture of Silence (Risk Aversion)	A systemic reluctance to articulate professional concerns, report systemic failures, or admit pedagogical errors due to the persistent threat of contract non-renewal or punitive disciplinary action.	Educators actively calculate the interpersonal risk of speaking up, frequently opting for silence to preserve their tenuous job security (Mean 2.65).

The synthesis of these findings suggests that the high level of peer trust observed in SPK schools is not an indicator of organizational health, but rather a palliative response to administrative dysfunction. When psychological safety is denied vertically, it is hoarded horizontally. The resulting "culture of silence" poses a critical threat to organizational learning. As noted by Itzchakov et al. (2023), constructive workplace dynamics require structural listening and support; without it, educators refuse to engage in the interpersonal risk-taking necessary for innovation. Ultimately, the data demonstrated that robust psychological safety is an absolute prerequisite for job satisfaction (Mean 4.67), performance (Mean 4.62), and professional retention (Mean 4.47).

IV. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that expatriate teachers in Indonesian SPK schools are navigating a highly precarious organizational landscape characterized by the Safety Paradox. While horizontal peer trust remains strong, it functions primarily as a defensive mechanism against profound vertical instability and inconsistent institutional policy. The reliance on informal peer networks engenders a culture of silence, wherein a low tolerance for mistakes inhibits professional transparency and innovation. Therefore, school leadership must recognize that a cohesive staff collective does not inherently equate to a psychologically safe institution. To secure long-term teacher retention and optimize pedagogical performance, SPK schools must prioritize structural reforms, transitioning from punitive management frameworks toward restorative leadership models that institutionalize error tolerance and guarantee psychological safety at all organizational levels.

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