Psychological Safety Of Expatriate Teachers In Indonesia: Basis For A Policy Brief

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Abstract. This study investigates the psychological safety of expatriate teachers in Indonesia. Using a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design with 113 teachers, the research finds that while overall psychological safety is high (M = 3.56) and peer support and trust are strong (M = 3.70), it is compromised by a low tolerance for mistakes (M = 3.42) and interpersonal risk-taking (M = 3.45). Critical challenges include inconsistent institutional policies (M = 2.74), job insecurity (M = 2.65), and poor work-life balance (M = 2.69). These factors are strongly correlated with lower psychological safety, while higher educational attainment is the only significant demographic predictor. Psychological safety shows a high positive impact on job satisfaction (M = 4.67), performance (M = 4.62), and professional retention (M = 4.47). This study concludes that fostering psychological safety is an imperative, proposing a policy brief to shift focus from cultural fit toward reforming institutional policies and leadership.

Keywords: expatriate teachers; institutional policy; psychological safety; SPK schools; teacher retention; teacher wellbeing; job satisfaction; international schools

1 Introduction

Psychological safety, defined as the belief that individuals will not be punished or humiliated for expressing ideas, asking questions, raising concerns, or admitting mistakes, involves fostering an environment where honesty and openness are encouraged and appropriate [1]. This concept plays a pivotal role in promoting a productive and innovative work environment [2], [3]. Indeed, research demonstrates that communication practices have a significant impact on workplace climate; for example, interventions such as listening training have been shown to enhance teachers' psychological safety, autonomy, and relational dynamics [4]. Given the challenges of cultural integration, language barriers, and navigating unfamiliar educational practices [5], [6], psychological safety becomes even more significant for expatriate teachers in Indonesia.

Psychological safety is increasingly recognised as a condition for effective teaching and learning in international education. Expatriate teachers face persistent challenges related to emotional labour, cultural differences, and systemic inequities. Research confirms that when teachers lack

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psychological safety, they struggle to perform, collaborate, and remain in their roles [7]. These challenges often intensify in cross-cultural environments where local policies, school structures, and societal expectations are unfamiliar [7], [8]. For instance, expatriate teachers may struggle with adapting to new curricula, communicating with parents from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, and navigating bureaucratic processes that differ significantly from those in their home countries.

Studies across Asia highlight these adaptation struggles; for example, expatriate Chinese teachers in Thailand face significant hurdles due to cultural norms, hierarchical structures, and language barriers, which impact their integration and autonomy [9]. Furthermore, research involving expatriates in Taiwan underscores the critical role of cross-cultural competence and cultural adaptability in achieving successful cross-cultural adjustment and performance in diverse settings [6].

The rapid shift of many education systems in Southeast Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted gaps in support for educators, particularly for those from abroad. Teachers worked under heightened uncertainty, with limited institutional safeguards [10]. Similarly, studies in Indonesia have shown that stress-related outcomes have risen sharply due to limited psychosocial interventions and weak workplace support systems [11]. Further research within Indonesia confirms this link, showing that work stress significantly and negatively impacts the psychological well-being of secondary school teachers nationwide, potentially leading to emotional exhaustion and burnout [12].

Further supporting the need to examine expatriate experiences within Indonesia, research on expatriates in the country's resources sector identified significant well-being challenges, particularly emphasizing concerns related to safety and security (physical, psychological, and financial), difficulties maintaining work-life balance, and the critical impact of external organisational influences like support and care [13].

Indonesia hosts over 168,000 expatriate workers, the majority of whom are employed in the services and industry sectors [14]. Among these are expatriate teachers employed in SPK (Satuan Pendidikan Kerjasama) or international schools, which follow joint Indonesian and international curricula. There are 437 SPK units across Indonesia, with 138 classified as international schools that are most likely to hire expatriate teachers [15].

Despite their contribution, expatriate teachers in Indonesia often work without clear institutional frameworks for support. There is no existing national policy specifically addressing psychological safety for expatriate educators. While inclusive education frameworks exist [16], [17], these primarily focus on learners, often overlooking the welfare of teachers. However, international research indicates that psychological safety is correlated with autonomy and strong workplace relationships [4].

Leadership style is also a factor; studies in Asia have shown that empowering leadership can foster innovation among international school teachers, partly by enhancing psychological capital and team psychological safety [3]. More broadly, meta-analyses confirm a significant positive relationship between various forms of positive leader relations and perceptions of psychological safety at both individual and group levels [18]. Specific leader behaviours, such as demonstrating inclusiveness (inviting and appreciating contributions) and maintaining

behavioural integrity (alignment of words and deeds), are recognised as essential for fostering this climate [19], [20].

Emerging research highlights that expatriate non-native English-speaking teachers in countries such as Turkey face similar structural challenges, including discrimination, unclear roles, and unstable professional identities [21]. These findings suggest systemic neglect of psychological safety is not unique to Indonesia. At the school level, many SPK schools lack formal channels for providing feedback, resolving conflicts, or accessing mental health support. This absence is linked to high turnover [22], [23], burnout [24], and potentially declining teaching and learning quality.

2 Methods

The investigation of psychological safety among expatriate educators requires documenting both broad trends and individual experiences. To address this, a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was utilised, focusing on teachers in K-12 SPK (Satuan Pendidikan Kerjasama) and international schools across Indonesia. This approach consisted of two interconnected phases, with initial statistical results guiding the subsequent qualitative inquiry.

During the first phase, 113 expatriate teachers employed in these institutions were surveyed. This stage, utilising a descriptive-correlational framework, established baseline levels of psychological safety and recorded participant demographics. Data analysis used both descriptive and inferential statistics to identify significant relationships among key workplace variables.

The two phases were integrated, with survey results constituting the basis for the qualitative follow-up. Dominant patterns and statistical irregularities identified in the first phase informed the development of interview protocols, making sure that the qualitative phase addressed the most relevant issues.

In the final phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposefully selected subset of survey respondents. This qualitative approach yielded understandings beyond those available from quantitative data, illuminating participants' lived experiences. These discussions provided essential context for understanding how institutional policies, peer relationships, and social integration affect psychological safety in daily practice.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Summary of Level of Psychological Safety

Overall, expatriates reported a sense of security in their positions and demonstrated high baseline levels of psychological safety ($M = 3.56$).

Analysis of individual dimensions shows a clear separation between collective cohesion and personal vulnerability. Participants expressed high confidence in their collective environments, with strong scores for trust and respect ($M = 3.70$), cooperation and learning ($M = 3.67$), and willingness to speak up ($M = 3.59$).

However, this confidence declined when personal exposure was necessary. Ratings decreased to moderate levels for interpersonal risk-taking ($M = 3.45$) and mistake tolerance ($M = 3.42$) as assessed by the teachers. A complete breakdown of these dimensions is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Level of Psychological Safety

Domain	Mean	Description
Speaking Up	3.59	High Level
Mistake Tolerance	3.42	Moderate Level
Interpersonal Risk-Taking	3.45	Moderate Level
Trust and Respect	3.70	High Level
Collaboration and Learning	3.67	High Level
Overall Mean	3.56	High Level of Safety
(n=113)		

3.2 Summary of Challenges to Psychological Safety

Table 2. Summary of Challenges to Psychological Safety

Domain	Mean	Description
Cultural Adaptation	2.38	Rarely Experienced
Professional Expectations	2.57	Sometimes Experienced
Social Integration	2.13	Rarely Experienced
Institutional Policies and Support	2.74	Sometimes Experienced
Work-life Balance	2.69	Sometimes Experienced
Job Security and Contractual Stability	2.65	Sometimes Experienced
Overall Mean	2.53	Sometimes Experienced
(n=113)		

Structural workplace issues were primarily identified as barriers to psychological safety, rather than social friction. Institutional policies ($M = 2.74$) represented the most significant obstacle.

Additionally, work-life balance ($M = 2.69$) and job security ($M = 2.65$) were categorised by respondents as organisational factors that were "sometimes experienced."

In contrast, relocating posed fewer challenges for teachers. Reported difficulties with cultural adaptation ($M = 2.38$) and social integration ($M = 2.13$) were described as "rarely experienced." These challenges are summarised in Table 2.

3.3 Summary of Influencing Factors of Psychological Safety

Analysis of the elements contributing to psychological safety indicates that social relationships yielded the highest scores. Peer relationships emerged as the strongest anchor for teachers ($M = 3.64$). Teachers also derived a strong sense of security from interactions with parents ($M = 3.61$) and from the wider teaching and learning environment ($M = 3.59$).

In contrast, institutional support received a substantially lower average score (M = 2.98), designating it as a significant outlier. This finding identifies institutional support as a clear and immediate target for organisational improvement by school leadership. Table 3 outlines these influencing factors.

Table 3. Summary of Influencing Factors of Psychological Safety

Domain	Mean	Description
Institutional Support	2.98	Moderately Influenced
Peer Relationships	3.64	Highly Influenced
Teaching and Learning Environment	3.59	Highly Influenced
Teacher-Parent Relationships	3.61	Highly Influenced
Overall Mean	3.46	Moderately Influenced
(n=113)		

3.4 Summary of Implications of Psychological Safety

Analysis of the downstream effects of psychological safety revealed consistently positive outcomes.

The data indicate that psychological security is directly associated with improved daily work experiences, as evidenced by high scores in both job satisfaction (M = 4.67) and job performance (M = 4.62).

The positive impact of psychological safety goes beyond routine tasks. Expatriate teachers reported that a secure environment greatly improved their overall well-being (M = 4.58) and strongly influenced their intention to remain at their institutions, as reflected in high professional retention scores (M = 4.47). The downstream effects are detailed in Table 4.

Table 4. Summary of Implications of Psychological Safety

Domain	Mean	Description
Job Performance	4.62	Very High Implication
Job Satisfaction	4.67	Very High Implication
Professional Retention	4.47	High Implication
Overall Well-being	4.58	Very High Implication
Overall Mean	4.59	Very High Implication
(n=113)		

3.5 Correlation Between Challenges, Influencing Factors, and Overall Psychological Safety

Demographic variables had a minimal impact on the results. Among all personal variables examined, only educational attainment demonstrated a statistically significant association with

psychological safety (r = 0.197, p = 0.036). Workplace challenges were associated with lower psychological safety scores across all metrics.

Table 5. Correlation Between Challenges, Influencing Factors, and Overall Psychological Safety

Variable	Correlation with Overall Psychological Safety (r)
Challenges	
Institutional Policies and Support	-.666*
Social Integration	-.638*
Job security and stability	-.597*
Professional Expectations	-.578*
Work-life Balance	-.495*
Cultural Adaptation	-.323*
Influencing Factors	
Peer Relationships	.789*
Institutional Support	.751*
Teaching and Learning Environment	.739*
Teacher Parent Relationships	.509*
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.*	
(n=113)	

The most pronounced negative correlations occurred when expatriate teachers experienced difficulties with institutional policies (r = -0.666) and social integration (r = -0.638). The presence of positive influencing factors was associated with substantial increases in all dimensions of psychological safety. Strong peer relationships (r = 0.789) and robust institutional support (r = 0.751) emerged as the most influential contributors to a secure environment. The statistical correlations between these variables and overall psychological safety are illustrated in Table 5.

4 Conclusions

The generalisations and insights are grounded in the analysed data and reflect the experiences of expatriate teachers in SPK schools.

4.1 Demographics and Professional Stability:

Expatriate teachers in Indonesian SPK schools constitute a diverse, highly educated, and experienced cohort. Most report moderate to high socioeconomic status and long-term residency, indicating relative professional stability notwithstanding working abroad. However, differences in age, nationality, and cultural background suggest varying levels of adjustment and support requirements.

4.2 Current State of Psychological Safety:

Expatriate teachers generally report high levels of psychological safety, especially in areas of trust, collaboration, and open communication. However, moderate ratings for mistake tolerance

and risk-taking indicate that some school environments remain cautious about experimentation and critical feedback, stressing the need for cultural change regarding addressing errors.

4.3 Primary Sources of Stress:

Teachers face continuous challenges related to institutional policies, job security, and work-life balance, which outweigh social or cultural barriers. This result suggests that institutional structures are the primary sources of stress. Dealing with these administrative shortcomings is likely to strengthen overall views of safety.

4.4 Drivers of Psychological Safety:

Strong peer relationships, cooperative work environments, and caring leadership are positively associated with psychological safety. Given the inconsistency of institutional support, fostering psychological safety demands continual investment in both formal policies and the quality of daily interpersonal interactions.

4.5 Strategic Implications:

Psychological safety directly influences key outcomes such as job satisfaction, classroom effectiveness, and teacher retention. When teachers feel safe and valued, their engagement and commitment to the profession increase. Therefore, psychological safety should be regarded as a strategic priority as opposed to solely a wellness initiative.

4.6 Demographic Variables vs. Institutional Factors:

Among demographic variables, only educational attainment demonstrated a meaningful correlation with psychological safety. Other personal characteristics, such as age and years of experience, had minimal influence. This finding reinforces the conclusion that institutional efforts have a greater impact than individual traits.

4.7 Communication and Collaboration Practices:

Teachers use various ways to maintain psychological safety, such as defining boundaries, participating in open dialogue, and occasionally choosing silence. The use of avoidance strategies indicates that certain school environments still require cultural and policy modifications to promote authentic openness.

4.8 Teacher-Recommended Reforms:

Teachers recommended school-wide changes highlighting transparency, participation, and caring leadership. Commonly suggested strategies included contract clarity, equitable grievance systems, and mental wellness support, underscoring the necessity for schools to integrate expatriate well-being into core operational responsibilities.

4.9 The Impact of Workplace Conditions:

Statistical analysis confirmed that healthy workplace conditions, including inclusive leadership, responsive policies, and healthy peer relationships, are closely linked to psychological safety. In contrast, institutional and contractual challenges consistently undermine teachers' sense of

security, demonstrating that improvements in psychological safety require systemic operational changes rather than individual interventions.

4.10 A Multi-Level Approach:

Fostering psychological safety necessitates deliberate, multi-level efforts that value communication, collaboration, explicit policies, and caring support. Consistent implementation of these items, aligned with workforce diversity, creates a secure and energising environment that improves organisational culture and productivity.

5 Recommendations

The following recommendations, based on this study's findings, form a three-pillar strategic roadmap to help SPK school leaders build and sustain a psychologically safe environment for expatriate faculty.

5.1 Pillar 1: Build the Foundation for Structural and Policy Reform

This pillar addresses the main structural challenges to psychological safety by establishing a stable, predictable, and fair institutional framework.

Revise Institutional Policies and Contracts: Address ongoing issues by prioritising contract stability, balanced workloads, and administrative responsiveness. Ensure policy clarity and prompt communication are standard across all school units.

Adopt Teacher-Informed Governance Mechanisms: Implement teacher-recommended strategies, including transparent communication, clear grievance procedures, and accessible mental health support. Treat these as essential for maintaining a resilient teaching staff.

Implement Regular Policy Audits: Conduct regular reviews to assess the impact of reforms on psychological safety. Continuously collect data and adjust policies based on teacher feedback and observed trends.

5.2 Pillar 2: Cultivate the Culture Through Leadership and Learning

With a stable foundation, this pillar highlights leadership's role in fostering a culture where teachers feel valued, can take professional risks, and receive ongoing support.

Promote a Culture of Learning from Mistakes: Introduce programs that encourage mistake tolerance, openness to feedback, and psychological flexibility. Leadership training and peer coaching can support this, especially where risk-taking and open communication are limited.

Prioritise Psychological Safety as an HR Strategy: Since psychological safety improves performance and retention, school leaders should include well-being indicators in staff evaluations, improvement plans, and HR policy reviews.

Customise Support Services for a Diverse Workforce: Develop onboarding and integration programs that address differences in experience, nationality, and culture, ensuring support services meet the varied needs of expatriate staff.

Refine Recruitment and Staff Development: Focus recruitment and professional development on creating environments where all teachers can thrive, as demographic alignment has little impact on psychological safety.

5.3 Pillar 3: Leverage Existing Strengths Through Peer and Community Partnership

This pillar focuses on amplifying what already works well, strong informal networks, by formalising and investing in collaborative practices.

Invest in and Formalise Peer Networks: Capitalise on the strong link between peer relationships and psychological safety by institutionalising collaborative planning, coaching programs, and shared accountability practices. This will strengthen inclusive teaching environments and parent-teacher collaboration.

Provide Training for Inclusive Collaboration: Offer regular training on effective communication and collaboration. Create safe spaces for open expression, feedback, team check-ins, and boundary setting to strengthen staff relations and reduce withdrawal.

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