The Psychological Safety of Indian School Teachers: Where the Mind is Without Fear

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Abstract
 A growing body of research has focused on understanding the nature of psychological safety (PS) and recognizing factors contributing to it. Psychological safety describes an individual's perceptions of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks in a particular context. This study aimed to examine the following research questions: What is the level of PS among Indian school teachers? What are the factors affecting the PS of teachers? And what type of support is expected by teachers to enhance their PS? A mixed-method approach was used to find the answers to these research questions. Neuroception of psychological safety scale (NPSS) by Morton et al. (2021) was used to collect quantitative data from four different districts of Punjab state of India. The focus group technique was used to collect qualitative data. Participants for this study were selected using convenient and purposive sampling. Quantitative data for this study was drawn from 100 school teachers and for qualitative data, 10 participants with extremely low scores and 10 participants with extremely high scores on NPSS were selected for two focus groups to find out the factors contributing to PS of teachers. The results showed that Indian school teachers had an average level of PS. The findings also implied the importance of PS for teachers and revealed that organizational culture, leadership, and teamwork are important factors contributing to PS for teachers.
Keywords: psychological safety, school teachers, Indian teachers.

Психологическая безопасность индийских школьных учителей: когда страх не мешает разуму

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Аннотация
Всё больше исследований посвящено пониманию природы психологической безопасности и выявлению факторов, способствующих её обеспечению. Под этим термином понимают восприятие человеком межличностных рисков в определенном контексте. Настоящее исследование было направлено на изучение следующих вопросов: Каков уровень психологической безопасности у учителей индийских школ? Какие факторы влияют на психологическую безопасность учителей? Какой вид поддержки необходим учителям для повышения уровня психологической безопасности? Для поиска ответов на поставленные вопросы была исполь-

зована смешанная методология. Исследователи использовали шкалу нейроцепции психологической безопасности (NPSS) для сбора количественных данных в четырех районах индийского штата Пенджаб. Сбор качественных данных осуществлялся методом фокус-группы. Участники исследования были отобраны с помощью целенаправленной выборки. Количественные данные были получены от 100 учителей, качественные – от 10 участников с самыми низкими баллами и 10 участников с самыми высокими баллами по шкале NPSS. Результаты показали, что индийские учителя обладают средним уровнем психологической безопасности. Полученные данные подтвердили значимость психологической безопасности для педагогов. Среди важных для психологической безопасности факторов были выделены организационная культура, лидерство и командная работа.

Ключевые слова: психологическая безопасность, школьные учителя, учителя в Индии.

Introduction

Psychological safety refers to an environment where people can show their real selves without any fear of judgement and feel safe in risk-taking. It provides a congenial work environment to make people feel valued, reduces stress, gives space for open discussions, improves the ability to give honest views without fear and ultimately helps individuals grow in the profession. Previous research explored psychological safety as a significant phenomenon in the organisational context (Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012), but it has not yet been examined extensively in the context of education and, not much attention has been given to the psychological safety of teachers which is an important area that needs to be explored, particularly during the COVID era. Psychological safety plays an important role in maintaining educational stakeholders' mental health and well-being in educational institutions where learning, sharing of knowledge, creativity, and innovation are essential activities. It helps people remove barriers to interpersonally challenging work environments, as it is difficult for individuals to give their best at work when they are emotionally depleted. A great portion of time in the lives of teachers is spent in school where they interact with their colleagues, students, and administrative staff to perform various activities that help achieve the school goal. The COVID outbreak demanded a sudden shift from offline to online mode that affected teachers' well-being and sense of psychological safety, as long work hours and endless video meetings blurred the line between home and work. Such situations lead to a longing for on-site work, a desire for distinct boundaries between work and life and a need for psychological safety in an educational environment. This research is an attempt to study the level and factors contributing to PS among Indian school teachers.

Literature Review

Research has recognized psychological safety as an important variable to understand how individuals collaborate to achieve a shared goal (Edmondson, 1999, 2004) and make it a significant concept. Psychological safety determines how an individual perceives the result of taking an interpersonal risk in a specific context such as a place of work (Edmondson, 1999) and facilitates the contribution of thoughts and actions to a shared initiative.

Across the decades of research on psychological safety, the central theme remains the same: it enables the individual to contribute to different ideas, visions and actions in a shared initiative. For instance, it describes why individuals share knowledge and information (Collins & Smith, 2006; Siemsen, Roth, Balasubramanian, & Anand, 2009), come up with proposals for improvements in the organisations (Detert & Burris, 2007; Liang et al., 2012), and take lead in developing new services and products (Baer & Frese, 2003). Research on psychological safety also suggests that it helps organisations and teams to learn (Bunderson & Boumgarden, 2010; Carmeli & Gittell 2009; Edmondson, 1999) and perform better (Carmeli, Tishler, & Edmondson, 2012; Schaubroeck, Lam,

& Peng, 2011). Psychological safety has become a significantly important phenomenon in recent research, as organisations give more importance to learning and innovation. PS is concerned with the reduction of interpersonal risk which accompanies change and uncertainty (Schein & Bennis, 1965). For the growth of knowledge economies and teamwork, psychological safety is an important variable, as both trends lead to new kinds of work relationships in which individuals are expected to share ideas and information and collaborate in order to achieve shared initiatives.

One strand of research on psychological safety covers such issues as well-being, mental health and post-traumatic growth (Norman et al., 2020; Sullivan, Goodman, Virden, Strom, & Ramirez, 2018). Schein and Bennis (1965) introduced the concept of psychological safety and found that psychological safety can decrease the fear of threat and create an environment where individuals can tolerate failure without guilt or retaliation. When a person feels psychologically safe, he or she can strengthen his/her bond with people and society (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010; Porges, 2021). The feeling of safety can be cultivated through the feeling of compassion (Gilbert, 2017). Soothing voice tones, reduced fight-freeze response and acute stress response ease the nervous system and increase the parasympathetic rest. This helps to apply self-soothing strategies followed by self-activating abilities (Gilbert, 2017). Trauma symptoms are the result of unregulated threat preoccupation, which may negatively affect one's biology, social activities and bonding (Motsan et al., 2021; Van der Kolk & Fisler, 1994).

Psychological safety describes interpersonal relationship risks and environment at workplace. An employee is self-confident, improve communication skills, and also develop a sense of belongingness if he/she feels psychologically safe in his/her organisation. The impact of a psychologically safe environment has been noticed in public communication (Wanless, 2016), community building (Singh, Shaffer, & Selvarajan, 2018), virtual meetings (Edmondson & Daley, 2001), communication in medical teams (Real, Hartsough, & Huddleston, 2021), and in healthcare workplaces (Ahmed, Zhao, Faraz, & Qin, 2021).

In an educational environment, psychological safety is a condition when the environment is free from psychological violence and teachers interact with each other and work as a team. It identifies the need for trust and communication and creates a sense of belongingness with the institution and contributes to the mental health and performance of teachers. The role of teachers is very important, and it is expanding with the idea of a distributive leadership structure in schools. Today's teachers are supposed to perform multi-dimensional activities both in their job place and in society. They also need to develop leadership qualities to work in groups. If schools aim toward improvement, then leadership cannot be limited to some individuals who are in formal leadership roles (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Lambert, 2002). Kools et al. (2020) pointed out the learning organization theory by Peter Senge that schools and corporate organisations must reframe their conceptions as "learning organizations" to fulfil the demands of the progressive world (Kools et al., 2020). To fulfil the highest and most impressive teaching-learning outcomes, teachers are expected to take part in collaborative work or teamwork and have to perform different administrative functions, and this process must include the trustworthiness to each other and to the institution even if any unsuccessful attempt takes place or the team becomes unable to attain the expected outcomes (Detert & Burris, 2007). This feeling of safety while working in a team is known as psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990), which is an important construct for an educational environment. In a study conducted by Baeva and Bordovskaia (2015), it was found that the psychological well-being of the students was closely correlated with the level of psychological safety of the teachers. Shahid and Din (2021) analysed the influence

of school leadership styles and organizational culture on teachers' psychological safety. This study further explored the moderating role of team effectiveness on the relationship between leadership behaviour and psychological safety in schools. The researchers found that a collaborative and cultivating school culture and relation-oriented behaviour of leaders result in higher levels of psychological safety among teachers.

Thus, it can be concluded that teachers can engage in innovative behaviour or take interpersonal risks in the team only if they perceive that the result of their decision will be safe from any kind of criticism from the leadership and colleagues. The psychological safety of teachers mostly depends on the disciplines and strategies implemented by the organization. Psychological comfort and the lack of emotional and mental stress contribute to intellectual activity among teachers.

Research Questions

This study aimed to examine the following research questions:
RQ1. What is the level of PS among Indian school teachers?
RQ2. What are the factors affecting the PS of teachers?
RQ3. What type of support is expected by teachers to enhance their PS?

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were selected employing convenient and purposive sampling (Saldana & Omasta, 2017). Quantitative data for this study was drawn from 100 school teachers (70 female and 30 male) with a different teaching experience (1-10 years). As for qualitative data, 10 participants with extremely low scores and 10 participants with extremely high scores on NPSS were selected for two focus groups to find out the factors contributing to PS of teachers.

Data Collection

A mixed-method approach was used to find the answers to research questions. Neuroception of psychological safety scale (NPSS) by Morton et al. (2021) was used to collect the quantitative data from four different districts of Punjab state of India. NPSS included 29 items with a 3-factor structure described as body sensations, compassion, and social engagement. It is a five-point Likert scale. The 29 items on safety measures were disseminated via an online Qualtrics survey. Focus groups were used to collect qualitative data. After the collection and analysis of quantitative data, potential participants for the focus groups were selected based on their scores. We sent emails to potential participants. After getting their consent, we divided the study participants into two groups: first who scored high on NPSS and second who scored low on NPSS for two focus groups on the Zoom platform. Focus groups are suitable to maintain the willingness of vulnerable groups to participate and facilitate discussion on sensitive topic (Liamputtong, 2015). In the current study, the research tool helped the participants to narrate their experiences uninterruptedly. We have moderated the focus group interviews on Zoom and recorded them for later transcription. The duration was 2 hours with a 10 minutes break.

Results

Phase 1. Quantitative analysis

To find the answer to the first research question, quantitative analysis was done to study the level of psychological safety among Indian school teachers.

The mean score of data was 72. 26 participants (26%) scored below the average level, 49 participants (49%) scored the average level and 25 (25%) scored above the average level of psychological safety. It was found that female teachers scored less than male teachers on the NPSS scale and the difference is significant (t=3.7). On the subscale of social engagement male teachers significantly scored higher than female teachers (t= 2.68). On the subscales of body sensation and compassion there were no significant gender differences. There was a significant difference (t=2.81) between the psychological safety of teachers with less than 5 years of experience and more than 5 years of experience.

Phase 2. Qualitative analysis
The focus groups were transcribed which included interactive discussion. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to reduce and unitize the data. We have drawn the inductive codes from the focus group discussions, then sorted the codes with the help of NVivo and prepared the initial codebook. After this, the second cycle of coding was performed to better clarify and apply codes. This was an iterative process that involved updating the codebook to ensure that all codes were added. Finally, the researcher performed code mapping, a process of categorizing and organizing codes, obtaining categories for the codes and drawing the themes with the visualizing feature of NVivo and then further categorising the themes into groups according to the research questions.

Willingness to engage in team
The first theme that emerged from the focus group transcripts was the willingness to engage in a team to improve the sense of psychological safety in the teamwork. Participants believed that when they worked together in different situations that they confronted in the organisation, it was easy for them to feel psychologically safe.

Team Leader behaviour
In both focus groups, most participants opined that team leader behaviour influenced the team members' perception of safe and appropriate behaviour, and was an example for all the employees of how to behave with others as they were likely to imitate the behaviour of leaders. If a leader behaves in punitive ways and is not interested in inviting input, the employees perceive that their views will not be valued (Edmondson, 1999), and it affects their sense of psychological safety. Participants described their environment as safe when the leader invited feedback and questions and was coaching-oriented. The respondents identified three aspects of the team leaders' behaviour which improve the sense of psychological safety, i.e. flexibility and openness, encouraging feedback and input, and being approachable and available to the team.

Trusting and respectful interpersonal relationships
Participants of both focus groups believed that trusting and respectful interpersonal relationships among fellow teachers improved a sense of psychological safety. When they had good interpersonal relationships with the team members, they could freely share their innovative ideas about content and pedagogies as they believed that they would get constructive feedback. Literature supports this finding, as Kahn (1990) also found that a sense of psychological safety was higher with supportive and trusting interpersonal relationships.

Organizational support
In addition to the effects of formal power and leadership behaviour discussed above, informal, emergent dynamics in a team were also likely to affect psychological safety. The

notion of group dynamics explains the interaction of characters and roles that individuals are assigned in the workplace (Kahn, 1990). Participants of both focus groups identified the need for organisational support to develop a sense of psychological safety.

Flexible work culture

A focus group of participants who perceived a higher level of psychological safety identified flexible work culture as an important factor contributing to teachers' psychological safety. Participants discussed that psychological safety allowed teachers to be free to speak up about their problems and concerns. In their opinion, the benefits of speaking up outweigh the costs for the individual, and it is possible when the work culture of the school is flexible.

Discussion

The quantitative analysis showed that Indian school teachers had an average level of PS. A significant gender difference was found in psychological safety among Indian secondary school teachers. Gender was also a significant contributor to the subscale of social engagement, which is characterised by being accepted, understood, cared for, being able to express oneself without judgement, and having someone to trust. Gender differences may exist because of the evaluation of the social environment as non-threatening and safe to engage socially by male senior secondary school teachers. A significant difference also exists between teachers with more than 5 years of teaching experience and teachers with less than 5 years of teaching experience. Teachers with more than 5 years of experience score more on NPSS and exhibit high psychological safety. This leads to the conclusion that a sense of psychological safety improves with teaching experience.

The qualitative findings highlighted the importance of PS for teachers and revealed that organizational support, flexible work culture, team leader behaviour, and trusting and respectful interpersonal relationships are important factors contributing to PS for teachers. A major contributing factor in improving the sense of psychological safety among school teachers is leadership and team leader behaviour, as employees look up to their leaders to gauge which actions are appreciated or reprimanded by the organisation. Also, school leaders play a significant role in developing the school culture and norms. Earlier research proves that trust and a good relationship between the leaders and the team members improve psychological safety (Carmeli & Gittel, 2009). The organisational culture of an educational institution is shaped by the behaviour of the people working in the institution and how their behaviour is interpreted (Hofstede, 1991). School leaders and teachers all have to contribute to the organisational culture and offer the right support which will eventually improve and lead to the conscious cultivation of psychological safety to guide the teachers towards self-development, innovation, and school improvement.

Conclusion

The study highlights the significance of PS among teachers emphasising its importance in educational settings. Research has also pointed out that if schools give attention to their human resource and maintain an egalitarian safe team environment, fostering high psychological safety in teachers may be easier. Previous studies proved that support for psychological safety in the educational environment also reduces risks and disturbances in the mental development of students (Baeva & Bordovskaia, 2015). Thus, schools must focus on creating an innovation-oriented, collaborative environment, where teachers can freely contribute and engage with their colleagues for their own growth, the well-being of students, and the achievement of organizational goals. Future research can explore psychological safety and its relationship with other organisational factors, such as job

performance, job attitude, teachers' personal disposition and its impact on emotional intelligence, self-efficacy and teacher effectiveness. In the educational sector, it would also be interesting to explore the effect of the high psychological safety of teachers on students' learning outcomes.

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