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Detecting Weak Feedback from Students Experiencing Safety Issues: A Critical Discussion from the Perspective of the School as Learning Community

Eisuke Saito *

Awareness of child safety issues has increased worldwide, particularly in developed countries. Several policies have been adopted, and the mandates for teachers' compliance have been reinforced as well. However, the definition of child safety tends to be ambiguous, and teachers face difficulties in collecting evidence on violations concerning student safety owing to the sensitive nature of the problems. This situation reveals the issue of imperfect and incomplete information, terms used to refer to the absence of information about other actors and the rules of the game. A school reform approach that originated in Japan, known as School as Learning Community (SLC), effectively addresses this issue. SLC was originally developed for re-establishing learning in school communities. This study aims to examine how SLC can reduce imperfections in and incompleteness of information in the framework through both internal and external collaboration.

Keywords: child safety, school as learning community, imperfect information, incomplete information

1. Introduction

Child safety issues, which include various types of child abuse, have been increasingly considered part of the responsibilities of teachers and schools. Simultaneously, these issues are extremely sensitive and difficult to tackle for teachers and schools. Legislation on child safety, however, has required teachers to report any issues with evidence of incidents to the authorities. For example, in Victoria, Australia, teachers have legislative duties based on the policies of the educational authorities if they find any evidence of safety-related issues, such as maltreatment or abuse; otherwise, they may be penalised (Falkiner et al., 2017). This strong obligation provides teachers with a greater sense of their duty to comply with policies

* Monash University
e-mail: eisuke.saito@monash.edu

and regulations regarding child safety (Walsh et al., 2008). Thus, higher awareness among schools and educators in terms of the necessity of supporting children who need safety is emerging (Baginsky et al., 2019; Fowler & Vallett, 2021; Ludecke & Cooper, 2023). However, the actual implementation process may vary greatly from school to school, teacher to teacher (Baginsky et al., 2019), and region to region (Fowler & Vallett, 2021). Despite this, the reinforced policies and greater opportunities for training teachers on the need for reporting may increase their motivation to disclose cases to the authorities (Bright et al., 2022). Simultaneously, an increase in the reporting of cases would challenge the capacities of local authorities with limited resources, including financial ones (Baginsky et al., 2019).

To identify and report suspected cases of child abuse, teachers need evidence acquired through careful observation of the type and degree of behavioural problems that students exhibit (Falkiner et al., 2017; Walsh et al., 2008). While some teachers may ask the potentially victimised students questions (Falkiner et al., 2017), there is no guarantee that the students will discuss their problems with their teachers. In this case, it becomes critical for teachers to be aware of students' non-verbal clues, including emotional ones (Karni-Visel et al., 2023). Non-verbal clues may include physical signs (Karadag et al., 2015). Teachers with training programme experiences or previous exposure as well as those in higher positions tend more frequently to identify such signals (Karadag et al., 2015).

Thus, training programmes are critical for teachers to comply with regulations and policies. There are diverse perspectives on the programmes. First, the programmes have been effective in that teachers have become more aware of child safety matters, resulting in more frequent identification and reporting of issues (Bright et al., 2022; Madrid et al., 2020). However, it has been reported that the training programmes are insufficient. In other words, either teachers do not equip themselves with the necessary knowledge and sensitivity (Falkiner et al., 2017; Feng et al., 2010; Kenny, 2001), or there is a need for a larger group of trained teachers (Karadag et al., 2015). Another perspective is that teachers may complete more training sessions than other related professionals, such as school nurses, so that the impact of the programmes is unsatisfactory owing to the lower frequency of reporting child safety concerns compared with other professionals (Feng et al., 2010).

1.1 Issues found in the literature

Legislation has been established, and some training programs are being conducted, but reporting is a problem. A pertinent question, then, is why this situation occurs. The literature has highlighted the following issues: the ambiguous nature of child safety issues, difficulties in maintaining relationships with students and their surrounding adults, and the need for multiple partnerships.

First, teachers are concerned about how to treat child safety issues. Child safety matters, such as neglect, maltreatment and abuse such as domestic violence, are highly complicated and may require some degree of cultural sensitivity, which may lead to failure in the identification of cases (Feng et al., 2010; Kenny, 2001). The most significant difficulty in handling child safety is its ambiguous nature. Legislation does exist, advocating for the urgency of resolving the issues; however, the definition of child safety tends to seem ambiguous and unclear to teachers (Falkiner et al., 2017; Wilson & Lee, 2021). This dearth of clarity could lead teachers to lack confidence in potential detection (Ayling et al., 2019; Falkiner et al., 2017). The ambiguous nature of the issues is likely to result in teachers hesitating to launch

investigations (Feng et al., 2010) or relying only on obvious physical signs as evidence (Ayling et al., 2019; Falkiner et al., 2017). They need to be prudent in gathering evidence (Falkiner et al., 2017; Price & Kehn, 2023); however, this evidence search may delay substantial intervention by the school or relevant authorities, and consequently, the risk may increase (Ayling et al., 2019; Kenny, 2001). The local authorities may feel that the evidence is insufficient; therefore, even if the teachers report to them, the authorities may not necessarily be able to intervene in a timely manner (Baginsky et al., 2019). In addition, as noted above, although the frequency of reporting has increased, the authorities cannot intervene sufficiently owing to budget restrictions (Baginsky et al., 2019).

Second, the hesitancy experienced by teachers regarding reporting to the authorities is owed not only to the lengthy processes (Feng et al., 2010) but also to concerns about relationships with the stakeholders, that is, students and their parents. Although teachers are more likely to report cases in which more child-oriented information is obtained, they also tend to contact parents if the information is more relevant to adults (Price & Kehn, 2023). Teachers are likely to feel that reporting may negatively affect their relationships with students (Falkiner et al., 2017; Forsner et al., 2021) and parents (Falkiner et al., 2017; Forsner et al., 2021). Meanwhile, parents' retaliation against the students is also a concern (Falkiner et al., 2017). Thus, it is important for teachers to learn how to communicate with students and their parents (McInnes & Ey, 2019; Sundler et al., 2021). For example, critically listening to the students and believing them (Sundler et al., 2021) is crucial.

Third, the teachers may have to undergo difficult situations when they realise that a student is at risk. They would be exposed to the traumatic experiences of the student, which could affect their own mental health; normative expectations by regulations or legislation; and low readiness to handle the issues. These factors may lead to teachers' susceptibility to a higher risk of mental exhaustion (McInnes & Ey, 2019). Thus, to manage these stressors, teachers need strong support and resources from stakeholders (Forsner et al., 2021). It has been found that the most critical factor supporting reporting processes is collaboration among the school staff (Ayling et al., 2019), including non-classroom staff such as school nurses (Sundler et al., 2021). Teachers also tend to feel the need for strong nested collaboration within the school and with larger communities based on various professional disciplines (McInnes & Ey, 2019). Similarly, interorganisational collaboration is critical; human factors, such as power relations or rapport between organisations, affect collaboration attempts in subtle ways (Ayling et al., 2019). Listening to the students and believing what they say are identified as critical aspects, as mentioned above (Sundler et al., 2021); in addition, the development of listening relationships between adults (Saito, 2023) is important.

1.2 The gaps in the previous literature

The problems identified in the literature emphasise the issues regarding information exchange among actors related to child safety matters. First, the teachers may find it challenging to know exactly what is happening with the student so that they can notice the relevant signals. They may feel threatened by a series of uncertainties, such as how to interpret the situation, whether to report an identified issue to the authorities, and what risks to take after a decision is made about the immediate action. Thus, one of the core issues regarding child safety is information about students and related actors as well as the rules that are applied to uncertain contexts. The preference of teachers for partnership with multiple actors represents

the importance of reducing and diminishing the uncertainty caused by the insufficiency of information through collaboration with those actors. Although these issues have to be addressed as parts of daily school practices, previous studies have tended to address these problems independently without sufficiently discussing how teachers can manage all these as a part of their daily work.

The question, then, is how teachers can reduce uncertainty regarding child safety issues, while carrying out their daily duties. One school reform approach that originated in Japan deserves mention: School as Learning Community (SLC) (Sato, 2019, 2022), as advocated by Manabu Sato in the 1990s, or Lesson Study for Learning Community (Saito, 2023). The author has been involved in practice and research outside Japan. It should be noted that this study does not argue that SLC is the best and only approach to school reform; the author points out simply that SLC has a framework aimed at decreasing the degree of information ambiguity about child safety inside and across schools. In SLC schools, teachers and other external actors collaborate to maximise the learning of students, teachers, and local communities. In the process of implementing this approach, it is emphasised that various types of information are shared among actors, a process which may help teachers reduce the amount of uncertainty caused by insufficient information.

1.3 The aim of this study

Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine how SLC would help teachers obtain more information and reduce the gap in understanding at-risk students and the rules for actions to be taken. The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. After the introduction, the conceptual framework is discussed. The following section examines how the degree of perfectness and completeness of information can be increased in SLC practices, followed by concluding remarks.

2. Conceptual framework

In this context, the actors interact and transact with one another. These interactions and transactions are based on a payoff structure called the basic game. Each actor has their own beliefs about the payoff structure and other actors' beliefs about it, which is called the information structure. In many cases, actors act based on basic games and information structures (Gergemann & Morris, 2013). The information is often not fully provided or shared among actors. This type of information is referred to as asymmetric information, categorized into two types: imperfect and incomplete information.

2.1 Imperfect information

There is information asymmetry regarding other actors. Actors inevitably may not be aware about some aspects of the actions or lives of their counterparts. The lack of information may influence an actor's strategy or action regarding other actors and their previous actions; this is known as imperfect information (Harsanyi, 2004; Wang, 2018; Way, 2015). In a school, particularly at the secondary levels, the amount of time spent by a teacher with their students is lower than the primary level; therefore, the degree of imperfectness of the information that the teachers have about the students cannot be ignored. Imperfect information,

which is derived from the uncertainty or unpredictability of the situation, influences the psychological conditions of the decision-maker, resulting in ambiguity and vagueness of preferences (Aliev & Huseynov, 2014).

Multiple scenarios of imperfect information regarding child safety issues are possible. Evidently, victimised students may have a large amount of imperfect information owing to the nature of the issues; therefore, it is inevitable that exposure of the entire experience to others can hardly be expected. Their family members may also have imperfect information, particularly if they have abused or neglected the students. Similarly, the stakeholders and teachers around the students have imperfect information about one another. Information about students and teachers is not necessarily exchanged.

2.2 Incomplete information

Absence of information regarding the rules of the game that need to be followed may also influence an action or strategy taken by the actor. Actors do not necessarily have full or complete information—occasionally, a wrong understanding or different ways of understanding the rules is possible, which is called incomplete information (Bowles, 2004; Greif, 2006; Harsanyi, 2004; Rasmusen, 2017; Wang, 2018). Incomplete information may occur when at least one actor does not share relevant information at the beginning of the transactions; subsequently, this asymmetry of information may develop if the information is not verifiable (Bowles, 2004). In the context of child safety matters, despite policy guidelines and sanctions against the failure of teachers in reporting cases, some level of unclarity in the definitions and expected actions taken by teachers may exist (Ayling et al., 2019; Falkiner et al., 2017), as discussed above. All these uncertainties may lead teachers to struggle to gather evidence, because the given payoff and information structures (Gergemann & Morris, 2013) may change. For instance, if the collected information is incorrect, the payoff of reporting to the authorities will be lowered, and the degree of trust or belief held by the authorities against the information provided by a particular teacher or school will decrease notably.

With incomplete information, actors tend to rely on their decision-making, experiences, and beliefs while interacting with others only to learn the actual rules (Song & van der Schaar, 2015). Consequently, in incomplete informational contexts, they are likely to incidentally transact with others with low relevance of interactions, whereas those with more complete information would transact with only those with high values (Song & van der Schaar, 2015). In the context of child safety matters, it is critical for teachers to transact with the most relevant and appropriate actors, both within and outside schools, based on necessary and sufficient information. This is the requisite perception about the rules of the game; a consensus among the actors has to be established—the rules have to be established, recognised, and made functional among the school stakeholders.

2.3 SLC

SLC began to be practised towards the end of the 1990s in Japan, when serious problems occurred in many schools regarding disengagement with and doubts about the meaning of learning, as demonstrated by students (Kariya, 2001; Sato, 2000, 2001). This is partly due to the bursting of the bubble economy and its consequent effects in Japan at the time (Saito & Takasawa, 2018), shattering the societal belief that good academic scores would enable students to enter high-ranking schools, leading them to gain admission into a prestigious uni-

versity and eventually get a respectable job with a good income (Sato, 2001). The economic shock and collapse of societal beliefs negatively impacted the motivation of many students to study (Kariya, 2001; Sato, 2000, 2001). In addition, it affected the safety of students, increasing the risk of domestic violence or neglect (Sato, 2012b).

To overcome these challenges, SLC emphasises authenticity and collaboration in the learning process, based on high-quality tasks reflecting the uniqueness of the disciplines of the subjects (Saito & Fatemi, 2022; Sato, 1996) and close consultations with peers through help-seeking (Saito & Fatemi, 2022; Saito et al., 2020; Sato, 2012a; Webb, 2013). Listening is an extensive concept in SLC. It involves contemplation about the meaning of representations, such as texts, remarks, images, or any other form of expression, and not just physically hearing sounds. This deeper consideration can be a basis for individuals to raise their voices about what they do not understand in these representations and to respond to others' voices. Therefore, listening is the basis and premise of learning. It is a series of dialogues among disciplines, others, and the self (Cazden, 2001; Inagaki & Sato, 1996; Sato, 1999) that necessarily involves caring (Noddings, 2013). In this way, listening relationships are considered an underlying anchor for practising SLC, as discussed in detail in the following section.

This philosophy about listening deeply reflects a notion of democracy, namely the 'associated ways of living' (Dewey, 1916). SLC is also a systematic approach to school reform to pursue the following aims: (1) reform daily practices based on collaborative learning for mutual consultation, (2) enhance collegiality and professional capacities through mutual observation and reflection by teachers beyond subject boundaries, and (3) engage parents and the local community in the learning process. The vision of reform presented to the schools contain three central goals: ensuring learning opportunities for (1) every child, (2) every teacher, and (3) as many parents and local community members as possible.

Teachers engaged in SLC must be experts, as it requires extensive professional learning and development. Thus, it is emphasised that teachers should observe and reflect on each other's lessons. During the school year, each school adopting SLC offers approximately 80–100 opportunities for teachers to observe their colleagues and reflect on various practices (Sato, 2012a; Sato & Sato, 2003). To provide teachers with time for frequent and intensive collaborations, the school management has reviewed, restructured, and reduced their daily administrative chores. To facilitate better learning opportunities for children, the reforms call for the introduction of collaborative activities in each lesson.

In SLC, the degree of perfectness and completeness of information is enhanced through close listening, observations, and reflections. The following two sections discuss the mechanism of how SLC works for these aims, divided into two subsections. The first one is about the mechanisms within schools, namely between (1) students and teachers, (2) teachers and teachers, and (3) teachers and school leaders. The second one discusses external stakeholders.

3. SLC practices

3.1 Working towards perfectness of information

First, in student–teacher relationships, pedagogical practices are key. In SLC, learning and care are considered as a pair. More precisely, help-seeking and responding to those needs are prioritised in the form of collaborative learning (Saito, 2023; Saito et al., 2020;

Sato, 2012a; Webb, 2013). This type of collaborative learning is conducted daily in each class in SLC schools (Saito et al., 2015; Sato, 2012a, 2022) as an indispensable part of school reform under this approach. Teachers are expected to carefully observe students' interactions with others and check whether they could be more involved in the learning process. Here, in comparison with conventional one-way teaching, there are greater opportunities for teachers to notice whether students are behaving as usual, reducing the level of imperfect information (Harsanyi, 2004; Wang, 2018; Way, 2015) about the students.

In addition to the practice of careful observation of the students in daily classes, teachers have regular sessions of joint observation of and reflection on the classes beyond the boundaries of subjects under SLC, which are critical elements in teacher–teacher relationships. In these sessions, emphasis is placed on observing the students and their learning behaviour through both verbal and non-verbal signs. This helps teachers understand the meaning of signals, particularly non-verbal ones (Karadag et al., 2015; Karni-Visel et al., 2023). Thus, in the reflection sessions, more analysis and information about the students is shared, and if some of the teachers notice any differences in students' behaviour, they share information about the students in discussion.

In this series of observations and reflections, teachers are expected to pay careful attention to students and understand their needs by gauging who can or cannot learn or interact well with others (Kitada, 2019; Sato, 2012a). The point is not necessarily how to interpret ambiguous definitions of the issues (Falkiner et al., 2017; Wilson & Lee, 2021); whatever issues the teachers observe are defined, and the most critical aspect is that teachers realise with a higher level of confidence that students may have certain problems (Ayling et al., 2019; Falkiner et al., 2017). This joint reflection on observed practices also helps teachers improve the perfectness of their information (Harsanyi, 2004; Wang, 2018; Way, 2015). It is more probable in SLC schools, therefore, than in other schools, that teachers will have a bigger picture of students who may have issues with child safety.

However, this does not imply that students there are not at risk. There are at-risk students in SLC schools indeed (Sato, 2012b, 2022). Sato (2012b) reports serious cases of child safety issues. One of the most vivid examples is two male students at a junior high school who dashed out of an art class in which the students were given the task of drawing self-portraits. One student had a serious history of domestic violence from his mother while the other had a history of parental neglect, moving among four different foster homes (Sato, 2012b). Sato was concerned about their behaviour, but the other students reassured him that 'it will be fine'. He found them weeping in the bathroom, but as the students had predicted, the two students returned to the classroom and completed their drawings after class hours in the teachers' room. The teachers and other students understood and accepted the issues of the two students in a caring manner. Trust was built based on the shared understanding of who they were: that is, more perfect information was obtained (Harsanyi, 2004; Wang, 2018; Way, 2015).

The school used to be a low-functioning school, where students were responsible for many violent acts, to the extent that the majority of the windows were always broken. Turning around the school depends on the school policy, under the direction of the school leader; the principal is responsible for the activities mentioned above. By incorporating SLC as a form of school reform, the climate of many low-functioning schools has become calm and settled, enabling every student to learn with a sense of trust and safety (Sato, 2012a). It is

challenging to turn such a difficult school climate into a more peaceful one. It is evident that students need to trust their teachers and peers. In SLC, the regular practice of collaborative learning is one of the major keys to reforming the school environment (Saito et al., 2015). While teachers are able to increase the perfectness of their information about students, students also get to know more about the teachers: they are also able to increase the degree of perfectness of information (Harsanyi, 2004; Wang, 2018; Way, 2015). Violence against schools and teachers reflects the distrust of the students; for teachers to be trusted by students, the students need to experience being cared for (Noddings, 2013) and listened to (Saito, 2023). Through these experiences, the students begin to trust the teachers (Sundler et al., 2021). The transition from imperfect information about the students to more perfect information takes place not only as a matter of merely reinforced intelligence on the teachers' part, but also due to trust between the students and teachers. Once trust is built between them, the teachers can gain more confidence in their relationships with the students (Falkiner et al., 2017; Forsner et al., 2021), even when identifying and working on safety issues.

Regarding partnerships with multiple actors (Ayling et al., 2019; McInnes & Ey, 2019; Sundler et al., 2021), close collaboration with various actors is emphasised in SLC for understanding students. One of the pioneering principals of SLC schools, Masaaki Sato, worked closely with Commissioned Volunteer Child Welfare Officers and Volunteer Probation and Parole Officers in the area (Sato & Sato, 2003). Sato invited these officers for lesson observations, reflections, and regular meetings, discussing the students about whom the officers were concerned. Child Welfare Officers were in charge of the welfare aspects of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and frequently visited the houses of the students thus discussed. These actions also helped to decrease imperfect information (Harsanyi, 2004; Wang, 2018; Way, 2015) about the concerned students to a certain degree.

3.2 Working towards completeness of information

As mentioned above, teachers in SLC schools can reflect on classes and learn from each other regarding which students need more attention. This is the process of building a consensus about the rules of the game to identify and consider ways to support students at risk of dropping out of school. Simultaneously, in combination with learning aspects, those who need attention in terms of safety matters can also be closely identified. This process of joint reflections and discussions helps teachers share an understanding of the payoff (Gergemann & Morris, 2013) of recognising the needs of and extending support to at-risk students.

In other words, the series of joint discussions and reflections is counted as the process of developing and confirming the rules of the game regarding identifying and supporting at-risk students, making efforts at the school level to decrease the level of incomplete information (Bowles, 2004; Greif, 2006; Harsanyi, 2004; Rasmusen, 2017; Wang, 2018). This practice establishes principles between school leaders and teachers about how to handle students at risk; it addresses an important aspect of collective work in increasing teachers' confidence (Ayling et al., 2019; Falkiner et al., 2017; Forsner et al., 2021). Teachers, therefore, are more likely to have a shared view of how to handle cases through the school-level habit of jointly discussing and reflecting on student situations through observed classes, minor findings from casual conversations or interactions, and daily classes.

Collaboration with actors outside the school can also help teachers confirm and clarify the rules of the game regarding child safety issues. Close collaboration with volunteer of-

ficers helped the school that Masaaki Sato led to establish a consensus on how to help at-risk students: they collaborated to decrease the level of incomplete information (Bowles, 2004; Greif, 2006; Harsanyi, 2004; Rasmusen, 2017; Wang, 2018). It should be noted that probation and parole officers oversaw the rehabilitation of the youngsters, and Sato encouraged students to consult with them. Eventually, the students began to open up to the officers (Sato & Sato, 2003). This demonstrates that the at-risk students helped establish the rules of the game by consulting with external resources before the situation worsened.

4. Concluding remarks

This study aimed to investigate how SLC can help teachers reduce the imperfectness and incompleteness of information about at-risk students through internal and external collaboration. In SLC, a high emphasis is placed on listening and caring. To decrease the level of imperfect information, teachers must carefully observe and listen to students on a daily basis and regularly exchange information in order to perceive small signals about changes in their behaviour or issues they may be experiencing. Students need to feel the care extended by teachers and their peers in order to enable them to feel comfortable in sharing any issues they may be facing. In other words, the degree of perfectness of the information must be increased for all actors. To achieve this, partnership with external actors is important, as reported by Sato and Sato (2003). To decrease the level of incomplete information, SLC practice emphasises collaboration among teachers through joint reflections and discussions on how to identify student needs and intervene in situations. In addition, external collaboration is crucial, and students must participate in the establishment of the rules of the game by consulting with external actors.

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