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Promoting the Social and Emotional Learning of Middle School Students in Japan Through Collaborative Classroom Inquiry

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Abstract

This case study focused on the influence of a collaborative classroom inquiry approach, called “philosophy for children Hawai’i” (*p4c Hawai‘i*), and involved the social and emotional learning of a class of 39 seventh grade middle school language arts students in Japan. This approach helps learners explore ideas with peers and their teacher. Research indicates Japanese middle schoolers have few opportunities to learn how to develop and maintain relationships, as they do not interact daily with many people. Data for this study included video and audio recordings of the *p4c Hawai‘i* sessions, students’ responses to a social and emotional learning survey, interviews with the teacher, a focus group interview with students and students’ written reflections. Findings indicated the *p4c Hawai‘i* approach afforded opportunities for students to improve socioemotional skills, such as self-awareness, awareness of others, development of relationships and responsible decision-making. Using the *p4c Hawai’i* approach, students expressed their opinions, even if they were different from others. At the same time, learners listened respectfully to peers to gain their perspectives, which cultivated positive relationships. Listening to different perspectives appeared to promote students’ decision-making skills. Different from traditional approaches, it is noted that teachers who use *p4c Hawai‘i* become facilitators. As facilitators, they assume a less hierarchical position, as they guide students and model how to share and

listen. This approach shows promise in helping teachers support positive social and emotional learning for children in Japan and may assist in reducing social reclusiveness and youth suicide.

Background and Rationale

Early adolescence marks a time of great change in youths' physical, psychosocial and cognitive development (Sawyer et al., 2018). Transition to middle school can be challenging as young adolescents simultaneously adapt to these individual changes as well as negotiate a new school setting. Middle school is associated with increased academic competition and social comparison that often results in loneliness, depression, and lower self-esteem and school achievement (Green et al., 2021). Bullying also tends to increase in middle school and then, decreases in high school (e.g., Waasdorp et al., 2017). Victims of bullying often become anxious, depressed and experience poor academic performance and connections to peers, with possible long-lasting effects (Halliday et al., 2021). Thus, middle school is an important time for students to engage in social and emotional learning (SEL), the development of self-awareness, empathy, positive relationships and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2015; Yeager, 2017). Likewise, middle school in Japan can be a difficult time for students (Mizuno et al., 2022). High school entrance examinations create stress and pressure for middle school students (Iimura, 2018), and Japanese secondary education is often described as passive, requiring students to memorize large amounts of information for college entrance exams that can determine career trajectories (McVeigh, 2002; Iulia & Niculina, 2017).

Bullying is a problem in Japanese middle schools (Akiba et al., 2010), and victims often cannot avoid peers who are bullying them. Japanese educators randomly assign middle schoolers to classes to take courses together for a school year (Mizuno et al., 2022). The students also attend field trips and other events with the same classmates and work together in small groups to complete chores, such as cleaning the classroom. Educators attribute these activities to the close relationships that students form with their classmates. However, some educators also point to the creation of a "class caste" or social hierarchy that can develop. Popular students tend to dominate the social dynamics, and students in lower positions become victims of bullying.

This current case study investigated the influence of a collaborative inquiry approach, called *p4c Hawai'i*, on Japanese middle school students' SEL. The *p4c Hawai'i* approach is an adaptation of Lipman's inquiry approach, Philosophy for Children (P4C)(Sharp et al., 1992). Whereas P4C was originally designed to improve reasoning, educators adapted the approach to promote self-expression and social skills within local contexts (Wartenberg, 2009). Jackson (2012) developed *p4c Hawai'i*, using lower case p and c to distinguish between the "Big P" of traditional academic philosophy and the "little p" of everyone's natural capacity for wonder (Makaiau & Miller, 2012).

Japanese Youths' Social and Emotional Needs

Compared to youth in 19 other countries, Japanese youth, ages 15-21 reported being the least happy, with only 28% stating that they felt happy, compared with 59% overall (Varkey Foundation, 2017). Suicide in Japan is the primary cause of death for 10- to 40-years-olds (Kawabe et al., 2016). Based on 40 years of research, Kawabe et al. (2016) speculated that youth

suicide was associated with the school calendar; its rates were highest at the start of school sessions and lowest during breaks. Analysis of suicide notes indicated that students who took their lives often blamed school pressure as the source of their problems (Lu, 2015).

The Japanese Government identified problems among middle schoolers, including bullying, stress from entrance exams and *hikikomori,* defined as social reclusion, in which individuals shut themselves in their rooms for months or years (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 1998). The Cabinet Office, Government of Japan (2023), released results of a 2022 survey on the attitudes and lives of children and youth. They reported that approximately 1.46 million people withdrew from society, including 2.05% of all 15-39 year olds. One of the characteristics of *hikikomori* (social reclusion) among children is their refusal to attend school, which affects 10.2% of Japanese middle schoolers. Some students arrive at school, but leave their classrooms to go to the nurse's or principal's offices. Some youth, who fear failure in Japan's success-oriented and regimented educational system, became social recluses (Sawa, 2013). Fear of failure, resentment for being forced to memorize large amounts of information and poor academic outcomes are associated with truancy and *hikikomori* (school reclusion) (Saunders, 2008; Sawa, 2013). The Japanese school environment can create intense competition and foster anxiety, rather than being a place where students feel nourished (Hisatomi, 1993).

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL is the process by which individuals develop abilities to understand, manage, and express their social and emotional experiences (CASEL, 2015). Worldwide, many schools administer SEL programs (Weissberg et al., 2015). Four meta-analyses of SEL school programs demonstrated such programs resulted in positive short- and long-term outcomes, including SEL skills, attitudes, social behaviors, academic performance, fewer conduct problems and less emotional distress (Mahoney et al., 2018). Most studies of SEL programs for secondary students focused on self-management and social skills and found positive effects, particularly for self and social awareness (van de Sande et al., 2019). Although SEL is an important aspect of middle school education, there is minimal research describing SEL in middle schools; additionally, middle school educators often need assistance in developing students' SEL (Main & O'Neil, 2018).

Social and Emotional Learning in Japan

Since the mid-1990s, the Japanese Government promoted educational reform focused on the philosophy of *ikiru chikara* (zest for living), the ability to learn, problem solve, think independently, work collaboratively with, and have empathy for others, exercise self-control and maintain a healthy body (MEXT, 2009). However, educators faced difficulties implementing the reform. The reform emphasized the development of SEL goals, particularly during *"*integrated learning time." During this time, teachers were encouraged to promote use of critical thinking for students to solve problems and reflect on their lives. Some educators believed that instruction during integrated learning time resulted in students being able to identify issues independently, express their ideas and collaboratively resolve problems (Oita Prefectural Board of Education, 2018; Robinson, 2011). However, some educators wanted more clarity about SEL goals, and students did not always understand the purpose of the SEL activities (Kato, 2020). Teachers

found it challenging to create SEL content and activities that were appropriate for specific grade levels (Takeda et al., 2018).

Koizumi (2005) translated CASEL's SEL documents into Japanese (CASEL, 2003; Elias et al., 1997; Elias, 2003), and defined SEL as the cultivation of skills, attitudes and values in interpersonal relationships that are based on awareness of oneself, interactions with others and responsible decision making. This Japanese definition of SEL reflects Japanese concerns about study pressures on their students. To outside observers, Japanese youth were polite and able to work collaboratively, but to educators and parents, the youth of the 1990s and early 2000s seemed to be out of control, bullying others and committing acts of random violence, seemingly unable to empathize with others.

Although Koizumi based his definitions of SEL skills on CASEL's frameworks (Elias et al., 1997; CASEL, 2003), his version differs slightly, reflecting cultural differences. For example, the CASEL definition of self-awareness emphasizes individuals' understanding that include growth and confidence, suggesting a future-orientation (Elias, 2003). Koizumi's definition focuses on individuals' understandings of who they are in the moment, reflecting the problem Japanese individuals sometimes have of deemphasizing their own thoughts and desires, amidst pressure to conform. Similarly, there are differences between CASEL's and Koizumi's definitions of "awareness of others."

The CASEL definition focuses on understanding those from diverse backgrounds and being able to empathize with them, reflecting the U.S. multicultural context. However, Koizumi's definition focuses on individuals controlling their emotions to deal with difficult situations, which is consistent with the Japanese concept of *gaman*–being able to control one's feelings in a social situation and to get along with the group.

These differences highlight the Japanese focus on *wa* (harmony) (Harumi, 2010; Reid, 2000). One of the ways in which Japanese individuals maintain *wa* (harmony) within a group is by exerting self-control of their emotions, thoughts and behaviors. Although *wa* is important in Japan, there is a concern it has overshadowed expression of individuals' emotions, which has led to problems among youth. Therefore, Koizumi's definition of SEL focuses on helping individuals maintain group harmony while understanding and expressing one's emotions. In this study, Koizumi's definition of SEL was used and *p4c Hawai'i* was applied as a means to cultivate Japanese middle schoolers' SEL.

philosophy for children Hawai'i (p4c Hawai'i)

philosophy for children Hawai'i (*p4c Hawai'i*) focuses on the development of thinking and classroom relationships (Leng, 2015). The "four pillars" of *p4c Hawai'i* include community, inquiry, philosophy and reflection (Jackson, 2012). The *p4c Hawai'i* students and teachers sit in a circle symbolizing interconnectedness, inclusivity and a lack of hierarchy (Makaiau & Miller, 2012). The *p4c Hawai'i* approach emphasizes intellectual and emotional safety for building trust (Jackson, 2019). Learners typically vote for a question that they would like to pursue and assume that no one, including the teacher, knows the answer or direction of the inquiry. Throughout the discussion, the group reflects on their performance as a community.

Jackson (2019) developed tools and protocols for *p4c Hawai'i* communities, including a community ball that is tossed, indicating who students choose to speak after them (Makaiau & Miller, 2012). The ball is similar to the "talking stick" used by Native Americans to designate who will speak (Baskin et al., 2008). Jackson also developed the Good Thinker's Toolkit for *p4c Hawai'i* discussions. The Toolkit consists of seven questions represented by the acronym WRAITEC:

W - What do you mean by that?
R - What are the reasons?
A - What is being assumed? Or what can I assume?
I - Can I infer ____ from _____? Or where are there inferences being made?
T - Is what is being said true and what does it imply if it is true?
E - Are there any examples to prove what is being said? And,
C - Are there any counter-examples to disprove what is being said? (Makaiau & Miller, 2012, p. 15)

In an increasingly depersonalized Japanese society (MEXT, 2018), *p4c Hawai'i* may have the potential to build communities and *kizuna* (social ties). Jones (2012) suggested that schools should aim to provide students with opportunities to collaborate and express their thoughts and feelings.

Educators used *p4c Hawai'i* in a school affected by the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami (Shoji & Horikoshi, 2015). Tōhoku was the strongest earthquake in the history of Japan and resulted in more than 15,500 fatalities, 4,500 missing people and 450,000 homeless individuals (Fujii et al., 2011; National Geographics Society, 2022). The tsunami also caused a meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant reactors, resulting in the release of toxic radioactive materials into the environment that forced thousands of residents to evacuate.

After the disaster, 10- to 11-year-old fourth graders from one Tohoku elementary school who participated in *p4c Hawai'i* demonstrated SEL to a degree not typically seen in Japanese classrooms (Shoji & Horikoshi, 2015). For example, one of the students who received the community ball initially did not say anything; and yet, he did not want to let the ball go. About 25 seconds later, he finally expressed his thoughts. Another student who had returned to school after a long *hikikomori* (social reclusion) absence said that he enjoyed the discussion and wanted to do it again. These examples show how *p4c Hawai'i* provided a structure to promote expression among children who struggled to interact with others.

Theoretical Frameworks

Dewey's (1915) and Vygotsky's (1978) theories provided the theoretical framework for this study. Dewey's (1915) theory is a foundation of *p4c Hawai'i*. Dewey emphasized the significance of experiential learning, believing that school should be a place where students discover what it means to be valued members of a group and learn skills and knowledge to be applied beyond the classroom. Consistent with *p4c Hawai'i*, Dewey recognized the importance of students becoming aware of their social significance.

Vygotsky (1978) believed that all thoughts, ideas and ways of thinking originate through social interactions. He referred to the Zone of Proximal Development, the distance between what children can do by themselves and what they can do with assistance from adults and peers. Across time, learners appropriate the assistance, such that those ideas become their own. Thus, the ways in which *p4c Hawai'i* social interactions in the classroom led to middle school students appropriating new ways of thinking and interacting was investigated. The research question was: How did *p4c Hawai'i* influence Japanese middle school students' social and emotional skills?

Methods

Design and Setting

A case study was conducted in the 2018-2019 school year in a public school in Kobe, the sixth-largest city in Japan. The school served students in grades seven-12, had a relatively small student population of about 375 students (Gaccom, 2019) and was popular among families. Students came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, but were relatively high achieving, scoring in the top 15% on entrance exams. The case study focused on a grade seven Japanese language arts (*kokugo*) class. This class was selected because the teacher was known to use *p4c Hawai'i.*

Participants

At the time of the study, Tanaka Sensei had been teaching for eight years, including four at the school where the study was conducted. Tanaka Sensei had a master's degree in psychology and was completing his doctorate during our data collection. For a decade, he had been learning about and implementing *p4c Hawai'i* . He heard about *p4c Hawai'i* from a professor at the university where he received his master's degree. Prior to the study, Tanaka Sensei implemented *p4c Hawai'i* in different middle and high schools, where he worked as a lecturer. He also visited Hawai'i and learned about *p4c Hawai'i* from Jackson (2012) in the years 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2019.

During the data collection for this study, Tanaka Sensei taught *p4c Hawai'i* once a week in the language arts classroom. Another teacher taught the class on the other days. When the class was not engaged in *p4c Hawai'i* while in Tanaka Sensei's weekly sessions, they read Japanese materials that were used as prompts for the *p4c Hawai'i* discussions. For this study, a signed informed consent form was collected from Tanaka Sensei.

Participants also included 39 seventh grade students (19 males, 20 females), ages 13- to 14-years-old. A subset of eight students (three males, five females), who Tanaka Sensei selected, also participated in a focus group interview. Tanaka Sensei said that he chose the particular students because he believed they would be honest when answering questions. For the focus group interviews, Tanaka Sensei collected assent and consent forms from the students and their parents. All of the students' parents also signed a consent form agreeing to Tanaka Sensei video recording the *p4c Hawai'i* sessions.

Data Sources

Video Recordings of p4c Hawai'i Discussions

From April to September 2018, Tanaka Sensei video recorded seven *p4c Hawai'i* sessions and shared these recordings with the researchers; however, two recordings were not audible, so they were not included. Tanaka Sensei regularly recorded his classroom when he conducted *p4c Hawai'i* discussions. He placed the camera near to him and at a distance from the students. Audio recordings were used to discern participants' speech and the video was used to analyze students' and the teacher's expressions and behaviors.

Interviews

Interviews (students and teacher) were conducted in one of the school's meeting rooms, using Japanese, one of the researcher's and the participants' first language. Tanaka Sensei was interviewed before and after the semester began regarding his perceptions of *p4c Hawai'i* and its effects on instruction and students' SEL. At the end of the semester, a 90-minute focus group interview was conducted with eight students about their SEL skills and the *p4c Hawai'i* sessions. The video interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Memos and Reflection Sheets

The recordings of the *p4c Hawai'i* sessions and interviews were reviewed and memos were written. In the memos, one researcher's feelings, hunches and questions were recorded (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Tanaka Sensei developed and used the reflection sheet for his *p4c Hawai'i* classes. At the end of each *p4c Hawai'i* session, the students individually completed a written reflection sheet, evaluating the inquiry and describing how the discussion topic related to their lives.

Social and Emotional Learning Survey

At the semester's end, Tanaka Sensei administered to the students a modified version of the Social and Emotional Learning of 8 Abilities Survey (SEL-8S) (Koizumi, 2005). Written in Japanese, the 16-item SEL-8S asks students to respond on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 4 (very strongly agree). Table 1 shows the survey's SEL constructs and sample items. Japanese researchers have previously used the SEL-8S in K-12 schools (Koizumi, 2011; Kitano et al., 2012). The scale displayed adequate internal consistency, with Cronbach alpha values ranging from .64 to .84 (Yoneyama & Koizumi, 2015). For the current study, the SEL-8S was adapted by adding 10 items that appeared after each question. These new items asked students to reflect on their abilities before the *p4c Hawai'i* sessions. For example, following "I know what I am good at and what I am not good at," section, an added question asked students, "How were you doing before you experienced p4c in class?" Students' responses to the second question were used to discern their' perspectives on their self-awareness of skills prior to the *p4c Hawai'i* sessions.

Table 1. SEL-8S Constructs and Sample Items

Construct	Sample Item
Self-awareness	I know my strengths and weaknesses
Awareness of others	I can tell when my friend is sad.
Self-control	I do not take out my feelings on someone even if bad things happen to me
Interpersonal relationships	I can cooperate well with people around me.
Responsible decision-making	I carefully consider what will happen when I decide something on my own.
Health-promotion and problem prevention skills	I try not to approach dangerous situations and scenes.
Coping skills and social support for transitions and crises	I can do well even if I transfer to a new school.
Active, Contributing Service Activities	I want to do something to help when I see other people in trouble.

Note. From Koizumi (2005).

Data Analysis

The data based on both the research questions and emergent codes were coded (Saldaña, 2016). Codes were continuously compared and organized, identifying themes by relating codes to each other and to the research questions. The data was coded in Japanese, themes were then translated into English, and the analysis was triangulated across the data sources. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to assess the internal consistency of the survey items (Field, 2009). Relationships between pairs of variables were considered and paired sample t-tests were conducted to examine students' perceptions of SEL changes after they engaged in *p4c Hawai'i*.

Results

p4c Hawai'i Sessions

For each 50-minute *p4c Hawai'i* session, the 39 students and Tanaka Sensei sat in a circle. In Video 1, the students introduced themselves. To introduce *p4c Hawai'i*, Tanaka Sensei asked students to discuss when in their lives they felt comfortable speaking. Students said that they could talk openly with friends and family and while they were riding in a car. In the other videos, the class generated questions based on class readings, voted on the topics and discussed them.

In the second video, the class pursued an inquiry based on the novel *Tale of Genji* (Suzuki, 1998). Genji's mother died, and Genji's father, the Emperor, married a woman who resembled Genji's mother. The class voted to discuss, "Is it okay to love someone who resembles the one you loved before?" In Video 3, the class pursued the question: "Would you choose a boyfriend or girlfriend based on personality or attractiveness?" The next discussion focused on a reading about Thomas Edison that suggested that he worked his assistants so hard that they did not get enough sleep (Mayama, 2017). The class pondered, "Can you work with a person who you admire if you don't get enough sleep?" In the last video, the class discussed Japanese *kamikaze* (suicide) Special Corps: "What do you think about the Japanese Special Corps during World War II?"

Social and Emotional Learning Through *p4c Hawai'i* Results

In the next sections, results from all data sources are presented to describe how *p4c Hawai'i* influenced students' SEL. In regard to the survey, the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the original SEL-8S survey items was .89, suggesting high internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha for each of the 16 dependent variables was also high, ranging from .75-.93. Below particular items on the survey are described related to specific SEL skills, namely self-awareness, awareness of others, cultivating positive relationships, and responsible decision-making. The teacher's role when using the *p4c Hawai'i* approach is also described.

Self-Awareness

Student participants reported that they had more self-awareness after they engaged in the *p4c Hawai'i* sessions, compared to before ($t = -4.70$, $p < .001$). The *p4c Hawai'i* sessions appeared to afford opportunities for students to notice their emotions and evaluate their abilities.

In the video recording of the third session, for example, Kenichi reflected that he would prioritize personality over attractiveness when selecting a partner, quoting the proverb "*Abata mo ekubo:*" **"***Abata* means pock . . . sometimes on cheeks, but if you like the person, the pock seems like a small dimple . . . so it looks cute. Therefore, looks differ by how you feel towards the person." In the session about Edison, Erika evaluated her values and emotions, "I don't want to work in that kind of environment. Lack of sleep won't create any great ideas, and I would be disappointed if I saw that kind of side to my hero" (video recording).

Even those who did not speak during the sessions appeared to gain self-awareness, as suggested by their written reflections. Shoko did not say anything in the discussion about loving a person who resembled a previous partner, but on her reflection sheet, she wrote, "If the person you like has gone away and the relationship ends, it is okay to start looking for [another] loved one."

Awareness of Others

Current findings suggested students had opportunities to become more aware of others and to practice perspective-taking. On the survey, students reported how their awareness of others improved after they experienced the *p4c Hawai'i* approach ($t = -5.25$, $p < .001$).

The focus group participants described how *p4c Hawai'i* helped them understand others' feelings. When classmates suggested perspectives that were different from Chikaki's, she tried "to understand why they were thinking that way, and then expressed her own opinion." In another example, Yumi remarked, "I think of the people who are around me when we are doing p4c. I give my opinion while I'm observing and thinking about others" (focus group).

In the video recording of the third session, some students changed their opinions after they listened to classmates' perspectives. After hearing peers describe why they thought a partner's personality was more important than attractiveness, Sayaka stated, "Well, I changed my opinion! As another student mentioned . . . I think that people's character cannot change, so I think it is better to choose personality." In the focus group, Keiko mentioned, "It is good to hear others' opinions because there are students who think so deeply and give better perspectives that I change my view." As an example, Daichi changed his opinion after a classmate said that he thought it was okay to love a person who resembled someone you previously loved. Daichi shared, "I changed my opinion because, as another student mentioned, this is my life, so wouldn't it be good to do what I want to do?" On her reflection sheet, Yuki wrote, "accepting different opinions led me to find a different perspective."

Of course, not all students changed their perspectives after hearing opposing views, but most acknowledged that it was okay to have different ideas. After peers said that it was okay to fall in love with a person who resembled a previous love, Ryoichi stated, "What the other students think is okay, but I definitely feel I should not fall in love with another person" (video recording). Students said, "Woahhh!!!" to cheer him on. Another student wrote on his reflection sheet that hearing others' perspectives helped him to clarify his ideas. In the focus group, Takako expressed, "p4c discussion is different from our regular class, in that I can express my opinion and also hear others' opinions. It is fun."

The most serious topic that students discussed was about the Special Attack Corps. During the last months of World War II, the Japanese government, recognizing their inevitable defeat, enlisted pilots to crash their airplanes into US warships in an effort to force negotiations. This topic is rarely examined critically in Japanese schools (Oi, 2013). The following results come from the video recording of this discussion. Karina proposed the inquiry in relation to a book about an officer who opposed the Special Corps. Karina said that the Government recognized that they were losing the war "but they still kept sending special suicide squads . . . They wanted to send a message that 'We haven't lost the war, yet.'" Seika believed that sending the attack forces to commit suicide was not right. Kanon also opposed Japan using the Special Corps in this way, "The government thought the war was more important than their people's lives." In contrast, Kaito thought that "it was impossible to stop the suicide attackers." He noted that since people had died in the suicide attacks, stopping them could lose the war and dishonor those who already died, which Kaito thought was not appropriate, given their sacrifices.

Cultivating Positive Relationships

Student participants reported they were better able to build relationships with others after participating in *p4c Hawai'i* ($t = -4.37$, $p < .001$). In the focus group discussion, Yumi contrasted *p4c Hawai'i* with debates in elementary school, where "there is a pro and con, and you need to

decide which side you are on." She preferred *p4c Hawai'i* in that "We discuss, and everyone is in a circle and participates . . . We can listen to each other's opinion . . . You do not have to decide which side you are on."

In the video recordings, Tanaka Sensei told the students that it was okay to ask questions during their inquiries, as long as they were respectful. By the third session, students used words that reflected respect, such as, "I disagree with Ms. Sakai" (video recording). Use of the community ball also appeared to facilitate positive relationships. In the focus group, Ikuko mentioned: "When the ball is thrown . . . at that moment, I think about what my peer really said and try to understand what I am feeling." Kenji recognized that listening to the person with the ball facilitated the development of good relationships, "Only the person who has the ball can talk, so we pay attention to the person" (focus group).

Karina said that developing relationships skills in class was important because outside of school, "there is no opportunity to talk [with others]. I have become more and more busy since I entered middle school" (focus group). In his interview, Tanaka Sensei noted that students in *p4c Hawai'i* classes got along with each other and there were fewer issues with bullying than in other classes.

Responsible Decision-Making

Data suggested *p4c Hawai'i* afforded students opportunities to learn to make decisions responsibly. Students reported that they were better able to make responsible decisions after the *p4c Hawai'i* sessions ($t = -3.74$, $p < .001$). In the focus group discussion, Karina said *p4c Hawai'i* helped her decision-making, "There is no black and white answer. There are many answers that I like, so I take many good answers from my classmates and put them together to create my own opinion."

In a video recording, Kumi and Shinichiro reflected on what others said about whether they would work for someone they admired if that person did not allow them to sleep and decided that it was not a good idea to work in that situation. On the other hand, Daiki, reasoned aloud how he would work hard for someone he admired because of the potential for great accomplishments, "Isn't the reason why people look up to Edison is that he sacrificed his sleep and . . . worked that much to make great achievements . . . I thought about that, and I want to work hard" (video recording). Takeshi considered legal issues, "Well, for me, I would decide not to work with such a person, I think we must not work with him in that situation . . . because I think there are labor laws, long ago and now" (video recording).

The Teacher's Role

Tanaka Sensei appeared to support an environment that helped students understand their peers' intentions. In the first session, he said, "It's okay to say anything you like; however, be respectful to those around you" (video recording). In one video recorded discussion, a student stated, "Well, I'm a little against Ito-kun [Mr. Ito]." Other students appeared to think that the comment was too harsh and said, "Wow." Tanaka Sensei immediately said, "This feedback was not personal, but was directed at the comment only." After he said this, the students relaxed and resumed their discussion.

Tanaka Sensei helped to guide students in their thinking processes. In the video recording of the class discussing *The Tale of Genji*, he asked students to consider the nature of love, "Does love itself change?" He also provided feedback that promoted self-expression. His guidance of students' communication skills was helpful when they discussed the Special Attack Corps. Tanaka Sensei did not pressure students to reply quickly, perhaps helping students to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts.

In the video recordings, Tanaka Sensei demonstrated active listening, modeling both verbal and nonverbal skills to establish rapport and communication. Leaning toward students when they were speaking, he often put his hand on his chin to encourage students' input, which communicated his interest. Tanaka Sensei also modeled appropriate self-disclosure. When the class discussed the Special Attack Corps, the students in the video appeared interested and surprised when he shared that his great grandfather went to war and died during a drill practice.

When students discussed whether they would choose personality or attractiveness in a partner, they talked about characters in a Japanese cartoon titled "*Doraemon*." Doraemon is a robotic cat who aided a boy named Nobita. Giant is a huge, brutish and plain-looking boy. One of the students pointed out that in the TV series, Giant bullied Nobita often, but in the movie series, he helped Nobita. In a video recording of this discussion, Tanaka Sensei commented, "I think that many people think Giant is a cool guy, but . . . Giant has been called a gorilla." A few turns later, the teacher got the ball again and said, "I was called Giant when I was in middle school." All the students were surprised and said, "What? Wow!! (laughing loudly). The teacher assured the students that he did not bully anyone. In this discussion, Tanaka Sensei assumed a role more equal to that of the students. All of the students were smiling and laughing when he told them about being called Giant.

Discussion

The current study provides a detailed analysis of middle schoolers' reflections in academic conversations, achieving what Strahan and Poteat (2020) noted was missing in the literature on SEL for middle level education. In the following section, the findings are compared to research and theory as they relate to the areas of SEL: self-awareness, awareness of others, cultivating positive relationships, and responsible decision-making (Koizumi, 2005). Implications are discussed regarding practice and policy, the study's limitations, and future research.

Self-Awareness

Adolescents' senses of themselves change as they become increasingly concerned with others' opinions (Sebastian et al., 2010). Teens often compare themselves to peers and recognize judgments others make about them, influencing their self-concept. The structured conformity of Japanese classrooms encourages youths to follow the majority opinion (Mansur, 2016). Kono (2014) noted that P4C can create safe spaces that are free from pressures to conform.

According to Vygotsky (1978), social interactions lead to psychological development, including ideas about oneself. Having opportunities to discuss different views may have led students to develop new perspectives, incorporating both what learners initially thought and what others

shared. Vygotsky emphasized that the goals of development are culturally influenced. Culture influences perceptions and understandings of emotions (Poulou et al., 2018). Markus and Kitayama (1991) discussed the interdependent self-view, which is observed in many Asian cultures. This view emphasizes interdependence and a cooperative relationship between the self and others (Lee, 2018). Such a perspective reflects membership in cultures that value awareness of others' feelings and social systems minimizing conflict (Kitayama, 1994). In the current study, *p4c Hawai'i* reinforced these values, including self-fulfillment that encompasses the development of meaningful social relationships and living interdependently with others, aspects of education that Dewey (1915) also emphasized.

Awareness of Others

Yamada (2018) noticed that in Japanese classrooms, some students who were normally quiet, became easily upset. They were emotionally immature, did not know how to express their feelings and tended to become targets of bullying or became violent themselves. Developing students' understanding of others and accepting differences may help to mitigate aggressive behavior (Koda, 2015; Yamada, 2018). One skill involved in the awareness of others is perspective-taking (Fett et al., 2014). In the current study, *p4c Hawai'i* provided a structured framework for middle schoolers to learn perspective-taking. Students listened to others' ideas and responded respectfully. At times, a classmate's perspective influenced students to change their views, and at other times students listened to different perspectives and were empathetic, but disagreed respectfully. Other educators documented how Japanese students gained perspective-taking through *p4c Hawai'i* discussions (p4c Miyagi, 2017).

Cultivation of Positive Relationships

Students' awareness of others may have influenced the development of friendships. The Japanese Government reported that second to bullying, friendship problems were the most common reason that children refused to attend middle school (MEXT, 2018). Friendship problems in school can create stress for students (Ishizu & Ambo, 2013; Kudo & Nozu, 2012). In the current study, students noted that *p4c Hawai'i* helped them to develop their relationships. One student noted that *p4c Hawai'i* sessions were the only places, in and out of school, where she had time to talk with others. The focus of *p4c Hawai'i* on developing classroom relationships can be a means to promote middle school students developing skills, such as empathy and acceptance, and how to manage friendships and conflicts with peers.

Responsible Decision-Making

To promote life guidance to students, it is important for Japanese schools to provide opportunities for student decision-making (Kasaoka Board of Education, 2012). This is fitting for middle school, as adolescence is associated with greater independence and demands for self-guided decisions (Hartley & Somerville, 2015). One feature of competent decision-making is the ability to distinguish better options for dilemmas (Byrnes, 2002). Adolescence is associated with an increased capacity for reasoning (Steinberg, 2011). A decision-making model proposed for middle schoolers involves five steps: (a) identify a decision to be made; (b) brainstorm possible options; (c) identify positive and negative outcomes (d) decide and take action on the choice and

(e) reflect on the decision that was made (Colorado Education Initiative, 2014). In the current study, students applied these five steps. They identified the topics to pursue and brainstormed ideas and opinions with peers and the teacher. Hearing multiple perspectives led students to think about possible outcomes, and they reflected on the process orally and in writing.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Japanese educators indicate an interest in active learning (Yamanaka, 2018). To facilitate active learning, it is important to highlight students' perspectives, while educators put their own views aside (Robinson, 2011; Wang, 2016). Contrasting a teacher-centered approach, in which students often refrain from speaking and feel alienated (Ishikawa & Onuki, 2015), *p4c Hawai'i* facilitators focus on students' growth and learning. When students participate in *p4c Hawai'i,* their talk increases while teachers' speech diminishes. Howell et al. (2011) found that focusing on middle schoolers' talk, during class discussions, built students' sense of community and their appreciation of a diversity of perspectives, as well as greater understanding of the content being taught.

Tanaka Sensei demonstrated that facilitators remain active in *p4c Hawai'i* sessions. As facilitators, they provide guidance by drawing conclusions that students might otherwise miss and encourage students to speak freely by modeling respect for others' opinions.

The Japanese Government proclaimed goals that included middle school students developing compassion for others and valuing perspectives that were different from their own (Japanese Cabinet Office, 2021). In addition, the Government encouraged learning activities that included active discussions and promoted cooperation. All of these goals are consistent with the *p4c Hawai'i* approach. The current study found that through *p4c Hawai'i* sessions, students learned about themselves, while applying reasoning and decision-making skills. *p4c Hawai'i* can also develop students' social and emotional skills, and in Japan, this could help to reduce the troubling incidences of *hikikomori* (social reclusion) and suicide. The results of the current study indicate that *p4c Hawai'i* may provide opportunities for middle schoolers to learn these skills and provide an alternative to a teacher-centered approach that has typically dominated many Japanese classrooms.

Limitations and Future Research

As this was a case study, the intention was not to generalize findings to other settings; thus, the results may be limited to this particular setting. Future research can advance our knowledge by investigating *p4c Hawai'i* and SEL in other classrooms. This study was also limited by the use of a survey that is susceptible to social desirability (Kaminska & Foulsham, 2013). At one point in time, students in the current study reported on their SEL abilities before and after they experienced the *p4c Hawai'i* approach. They may not have been able to remember what they were able to do prior, and this recall bias could have challenged internal validity (Hassan, 2005). In addition, it is also recognized that students' SEL could have developed naturally in early adolescence, rather than because of their *p4c Hawai'i* participation.

Studying *p4c Hawai'i* participation and SEL among middle schoolers with a comparison group and across a longer period of time is recommended for future studies. Dewey (1915) believed that students discover what it means to be valued members of a social group and apply what they learn in school to interactions in the wider community. Following students into these broader contexts would be helpful in describing how learners use the skills from *p4c Hawai'i* sessions with their families and in the community. Further, research is also needed to clarify how *p4c Hawai'i* may dissuade youths from societal problems like *hikikomori* (social reclusion) and suicide.

About the Authors

Mari was raised in Japan and speaks the same dialect as the participants. She has resided in the US for over a decade and received her MEd in counseling and PhD in educational psychology. After taking a class from Jackson on *p4c Hawai'i*, Mari felt relaxed, safe and free to speak in class. She appreciated these positive interactions with classmates as friends rather than contenders and wanted to learn how *p4c Hawai'i* could be applied to education in Japan.

Born and raised in Hawai'i, Ann is a professor of educational psychology who has participated in p4c sessions and studies dialogic instruction. Her grandparents emigrated from Japan and Okinawa to Hawai'i; so, although she does not speak Japanese, she has engaged in Japanese and Okinawan activities. Ann has a relative in Japan who was *hikikomori*.

Both researchers recognize that they have a positive bias toward *p4c Hawai'i,* which could have resulted in their focusing on data that were consistent with its positive effects. To counter these potential biases, they looked for negative instances of themes, triangulated the data and reflected on their positionality (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

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