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Promoting Psychosocial Safety Climate Across School Teams: A Schoolwide Leadership Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study uses document analysis, interviews, and focus groups to explore how the principal and line managers promote psychosocial safety climate (PSC) across teams in an Aotearoa/New Zealand school. While principals' support for teachers' psychological health has been examined, how they support line managers in developing team and individual-level PSC remains unclear. Findings indicate that PSC is not always directly transferred from the principal to teachers but operationalized by line managers, positioning PSC as a multilevel, collectively enacted process. A multilevel model shows how leadership helps operationalize and transfer PSC across school, team, and individual levels.

Introduction

Organizational safety climates are not solely enacted through policy documents but are operationalized in everyday interactions between leaders and employees, as well as through the implementation of relevant practices and procedures. The purpose of this investigation is to explore how line managers promote the psychosocial safety climate (PSC) from principal-level intent to team and individual settings within a secondary school context. This single-case study examines multilevel leadership approaches through which the school's leaders can transfer PSC, highlighting the organizational processes that shape PSC in educational settings. PSC is defined by Dollard and Bakker (2010, p. 580) as the "policies, practices, and procedures for the protection of employee psychological health and safety," reflecting an organizational climate free from psychological harm generated by workplace conditions. "Transfer" in this research refers to the perceived transmission of PSC through leadership enactment and team experiences from the school level to the team and individual levels, with the intention of supporting teachers' psychological H&S through everyday interactions, experiences, and practices.

Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand must comply with the (Health and Safety at Work Act, 2015), which requires employers to provide the highest reasonably practicable level of protection from both physical and psychological workplace risks (Health and Safety at Work Act, 2015). Although there is no national teacher wellbeing framework, schools can access wellbeing resources through the Ministry of Education and the Teaching Council. However, these resources are generally broad and tend to emphasize the individual level rather than more effective systemic organizational approaches to wellbeing (White, 2020).

Leaders at all levels shape how schools operate (Langford & Crawford, 2025), potentially influencing PSC across school, team, and individual levels. Through policy and structural changes, leaders can improve or worsen teachers' working conditions (Manning et al., 2020). For example, excessive performance monitoring and poor work-life boundaries can increase workload, reduce autonomy, and harm teacher wellbeing (Brady & Wilson, 2021). Likewise, curriculum and reporting changes often impose tight deadlines and higher expectations, contributing to the high-pressure nature of teachers' work (Ofsted, 2019).

While principals are pivotal in shaping school and individual-level PSC (Yulita, Idris, & Abdullah, 2022), little is known about how they support line managers in operationalizing key

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policies and procedures, such as professional learning communities (PLCs) and teacher mentoring, and how this support facilitates PSC transfer. This gap is notable, given that schools typically comprise interconnected teams led by line managers who work closely with teachers to implement these initiatives effectively. The present study addresses this gap through the following research question:

How do school leaders (the principal and line managers) facilitate the operationalization and transfer of PSC across school teams?

Literature Review

Psychosocial Safety Climate

PSC reflects the working conditions that influence employees' psychological health and engagement (Afsharian et al., 2019) and is shaped by management policies, practices, and procedures (McLinton et al., 2018). It is strengthened when leaders foster a psychologically safe, positive work environment (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). PSC comprises four domains: management commitment and support, management priority, participation in H&S activities and policy, and organizational communication, collectively representing employees' perceptions of their workplace's psychological health and safety (Bentley et al., 2021). A related but distinct concept is psychological safety, which refers to employees feeling safe to take interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999) rather than PSC's much broader focus on the protection of psychological harm.

Research shows that PSC is a lead indicator of psychological health and functions as both an antecedent and a moderator of psychosocial factors and hazards (Yulita, Idris, & Dollard, 2022). PSC has been termed the "cause of causes" of workplace stress and an upstream predictor of stressors, highlighting its role in buffering the adverse effects of job demands while enhancing the positive effects of job resources (Biron et al., 2019). Furthermore, PSC reflects the working conditions that specifically affect psychological health at the organizational, team, and individual levels (Afsharian et al., 2019), providing a multilevel approach to assessing organizational climate (Zadow et al., 2019).

While school climate encompasses the overall educational, relational, and organizational environment experienced by the school community (Wang & Degol, 2016), PSC specifically focuses on employees' shared perceptions of management commitment and organizational practices and policies that support and prioritize psychological H&S. PSC is stronger when organizations and leadership create a psychologically safe environment and foster favorable working conditions and a positive work culture (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). Leaders play a pivotal role in developing organizational culture and in designing and enacting policies, practices, and procedures related to employee psychological health (Dollard & Bailey, 2019). Leaders who actively identify and mitigate psychosocial risks and ensure that job demands are manageable and work remains appropriately challenging are more likely to develop a positive PSC (Dollard et al., 2019). Mounting evidence indicates that PSC positively influences job design, leading to roles with lower job strain and diverse tasks that offer sufficient employee discretion (Afsharian et al., 2025).

Research suggests that leaders at all levels play a key role in shaping policies and practices that support and protect employees' psychological health (McLinton et al., 2018). The effectiveness of interventions and employees' exposure to psychosocial risks are influenced by line managers' day-to-day behaviors and management practices (Biron et al., 2018). Line managers influence the strength with which psychosocial safety values are communicated (Loh et al., 2021), making them critical in shaping team climate and working conditions (Schneider et al., 2017).

A growing body of research links PSC to teacher wellbeing, showing that it can buffer psychosocial risks and reduce teacher distress, stress, and emotional exhaustion while enhancing engagement and job satisfaction (Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Garrick et al., 2014; Viseu et al., 2025). Although teacher wellbeing is not the primary focus of this study, PSC provides a useful lens for understanding how school leaders create organizational conditions that support wellbeing through effective policies and procedures.

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

A useful way to understand how teachers experience resource gains and losses within their teams and wider school environment is through the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. It proposes that individuals and groups within organizations are motivated to acquire, protect, and build resources such as social connection, social support, autonomy, clarity, time, and space (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Stress can arise when these resources are threatened or lost amid job demands (Hobfoll, 2014). Resources are characterized by their internal (e.g., self-efficacy) or external (e.g., social support) locus relative to the individual (Holmgren et al., 2017). COR theory proposes that employees can accrue resources through gains, which may develop and benefit wellbeing over time, while also preventing resource loss (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Importantly, those who lack resources are not only more vulnerable to further resource losses but also require investment in resources to compensate for potential future losses (Hobfoll, 2014). The loss-spiral dimension within COR theory is therefore valuable for understanding the importance of preventing resource loss, particularly for beginning teachers, who, as Falecki and Mann (2020) advise, require additional support to build content knowledge, reflect on their learning, and receive regular feedback from colleagues and leaders.

In positive PSC contexts, employees are more likely to receive supportive practices that help accumulate resources (Inoue et al., 2025). Resources tend to travel through resource-caravan passageways and are also developed together, creating ecologies that either sustain or undermine their coexistence (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Caravan passageways reflect the environmental conditions that support, foster, enrich, and protect the resources of organizations, teams, and individuals (Hobfoll, 2014). In positive PSC settings, employees feel safer using resources that may serve as higher-order resource mechanisms provided by management. Therefore, even when rewards are low, a positive PSC context compensates for them by providing a “caravan passageway” that reduces the impact of high emotional demands and enables employees to work in a stress-free environment that mitigates resource constraints (Loh et al., 2018). PSC serves as a resource channel through which employees feel that it protects them from psychological and resource loss, and that they are therefore not required to invest energy and resources in managing perceived threats to their psychological health (Zadow et al., 2023).

School Leaders

Although principals remain the primary power actors shaping the decisions and behaviors of other leaders in Aotearoa/New Zealand schools, a distributed leadership approach extends leadership beyond the principal role and has been described as a means “to share and spread the burdens of school leadership” (Cardno & Tetzlaff, 2017, p. 70). This distributed leadership model was, in part, a response to the 1989 Tomorrow’s Schools reforms, which saw Aotearoa/New Zealand schools converted into self-managing institutions responsible for designing their own charters (Openshaw, 2014). These widespread reforms led to greater autonomy and higher expectations for schools, increasing leaders’ workloads (McGee & Hampton, 1996) and, consequently, requiring larger, more distributed leadership teams. More generally, there is a trend toward adopting distributive leadership across many global education contexts (Harris et al., 2022).

School leaders shape the culture of their schools, defined by the norms, values, and behaviors they establish and uphold, directly impacting teachers’ daily experiences and psychological wellbeing (Liggett, 2024). For instance, Tschannen-Moran et al. (2014) posited that school leaders need to create a culture characterized by norms that deliberately foster and support positive interactions, which lead to positive “beliefs” among staff and students. Hence, establishing trusting, respectful relationships and providing professional development opportunities facilitate a positive school culture (Liggett, 2024).

The degree of support teachers receive from their leaders has also been perceived by teachers and leaders as a crucial component of their role (Hauseman, 2021). However, Daniëls et al. (2020) identify differences in leaders’ and teachers’ perspectives on leadership support. While leaders believe coaching and guiding are at the core of their job, teachers view leadership as facilitating support and recognizing staff’s achievements and contributions. Notwithstanding these different perspectives, both leaders and teachers agree that prioritizing trust, openness, and collaboration between the two parties is imperative (Daniëls et al., 2020),

and that leaders must focus on providing emotional support by strengthening relationships with beginning teachers (Le Cornu, 2013). These contrasting perspectives also highlight a gap in understanding how leadership transfers PSC across school teams. Despite recognizing the importance of PSC in school workplaces, research has largely focused on its antecedents and outcomes at the organizational and team levels, while overlooking how PSC is operationalized and transferred across hierarchical levels, particularly through line managers' actions.

Methods

This research employed an explanatory case study to explore how school leaders operationalize and transfer PSC across multiple teams within a secondary school with a relatively positive PSC setting. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within the specific context of the participating school. Identifying and recruiting a suitable school was challenging due to the study's extensive access requirements. Consequently, the case was selected through pragmatic purposive sampling, as we were privileged that the school was willing to participate and provide sufficient access to conduct this research.

The case involved a modern urban secondary school in Aotearoa/New Zealand with approximately 70 staff (leadership, teaching, and support personnel) and 1,000 students. The school is led by a principal and comprises four semi-autonomous teams, each led by two line managers who co-lead 12 teachers from different disciplines. In this research, the principal and line managers (team co-leaders) are collectively referred to as "school leaders." Co-leaders share team leadership responsibilities, including overseeing the curriculum, integrating the school's charter, managing student pastoral care, communicating with students' families, and leading and mentoring a team of teachers. The principal pairs these co-leaders based on their strengths and skills. For instance, leaders with strengths in pastoral care are usually paired with those with strengths in curriculum, so line management expertise is varied across the four teams, benefiting students and staff. However, each co-leader is expected to possess adequate knowledge in all areas.

The sample included teachers, leaders, and counselors (Table 1). As registered teachers who worked closely with staff and leaders, counselors provided valuable insights into leadership and PSC. Their accounts could also be triangulated with those of other participants.

Although participation was voluntary, purposive sampling was used where possible to achieve proportional representation across roles and teams (i.e., line managers and staff from each team), ensuring variation across key subgroups (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We relied on leaders and non-leaders from each team for interviews and focus groups. This helped identify leadership and PSC variations across settings. Many staff and leaders, having worked in different teams over the years, offered valuable insights into these variations across teams.

As shown in Table 2, data were collected through document analysis, 26 semi-structured interviews, and three focus groups. All interviews and focus groups were conducted in private meeting rooms to protect confidentiality. Transcripts were anonymized to remove identifying information. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, participant variation, researcher reflexivity, data triangulation, and coding tables, thereby enhancing transparency and mitigating participant and researcher bias. Power dynamics between leaders and teachers were acknowledged throughout data collection and mitigated through separate focus groups for leaders and teachers (the principal was intentionally excluded from the "leader" focus group). The university's Human Ethics Committee reviewed and approved the study (ref: NOR 22/79).

Document analysis was conducted to interpret school policies and procedures related to leadership and to assess their potential impact on PSC, as it can help cross-check findings from other data sources

Table 1. Participant representation across different roles and data sources.

Role of participants	Number of participants involved in interviews	Number of participants involved in focus groups
Teachers	18	10
School leaders (principal and line managers)	6	3
School counselors*	2	–
Total participants	26	13

Note: *Although school counselors were invited to join the focus groups, none chose to participate.

Table 2. Data collection stages.

Data collection activity	Occurrences/ number	Dates scheduled
April 2023		
Stage One – Semi-structured interviews - Semi-structured interviews	26	May to June 2023
Stage Two – Focus group sessions - Subject teachers’ focus groups - Leaders’ focus group	2 1	August to September 2023
October 2023		

Document analysis
(April to October 2023)

- Publicly accessible documents
- Teaching and learning documents
- Practical documents (staff use only)
- Photos of house and schoolwide artefacts which include text

(Silverman, 2017). It involved skimming, reading, and analysis, enabling a careful and focused review of the data's characteristics to uncover themes related to the phenomena under study (Bowen, 2009). Semi-structured interviews, which averaged 41 minutes, sought participants' perceptions of leaders' prioritization of teachers' psychological health. For instance, participants were first asked, "Do you think leadership prioritises the psychological health of staff?" To understand the potential link between leadership and PSC, a further question asked, "Do you have any views on how school leaders may contribute to making your school a psychologically healthy and safe workplace?" Next, 55-minute focus groups were designed to deepen understanding of how line managers operationalize PSC at the team and individual levels. To establish this understanding, participants were asked, "How do line managers contribute to PSC?" Groups of four and five teachers took part in the two teacher focus groups, while three school leaders participated in the leaders' focus group. A sequencing approach that included an icebreaker, an opening question, a transition question, key questions, and a debriefing question ensured the collection of rich and insightful data (Billups, 2021). The sequential data collection process enabled the interview data to meaningfully inform the focus groups' interview schedule. An inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) facilitated critical reflection and engagement with the data. For example, interview data highlighted the principal's impact on line managers' prioritization of teachers' psychological health through specific leadership approaches, prompting further clarification during focus groups. As data were collected, separate coding systems were developed in NVivo for each data source, and multiple revisions were made to ensure that the codes provided a credible interpretation of the data (Bazeley, 2021). For example, a separate code for the principal's impact on school PSC was developed from data collected through organizational documentation, interviews, and focus groups, enabling the identification and substantiation of common themes across sources. Identifying commonalities enables data triangulation, substantiates themes, and reduces respondent and researcher bias (Gibbs, 2018).

To mitigate researcher bias and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, a range of strategies were employed, including reflexive practices, code hierarchies, code tables, and repeated reexamination of transcripts. Collectively, these reflective and comparative measures strengthen the balance and corroboration of the analysis (Gibbs, 2018). Further, field notes and transcribed data were regularly checked by the article's coauthors, which, as Galletta (2013) posited, provides additional verification of the meaning of the collected data.

Findings

This section examines how school leaders at different levels within the school operationalize PSC-related policies and procedures, which facilitate the transfer of PSC across school teams. Findings were largely consistent across data sources, with no meaningful differences between leaders and teachers/counselors. An inductive analysis led to the development of two primary themes: 1. "*Setting the scene*" – *the principal*, and 2. *Line managers' influence*.

Various acronyms are used to identify data sources: OD refers to the Organizational Document and its assigned number (see supplementary document). P refers to the interviewed Participant (teacher/counselor to ensure anonymity) and their assigned number, while SL refers to the interviewed School Leader (principal or line managers) and their assigned number. TFGP refers to Teacher Focus Group Participant and their assigned number, while LMFGP relates to Line Manager Focus Group Participant and their assigned number.

"Setting the Scene" – The Principal

This primary theme highlights the principal's leading role in establishing school-level PSC and supporting line management in promoting teachers' psychological health. It comprises three subthemes: *the role model*, *the advocate*, and *acting behind the scenes*. Each subtheme reflects a key leadership approach the principal uses to enact practices and procedures that support the transfer of PSC from the school to team and individual levels. As these practices are primarily observed and experienced by school leaders, most quotations in this theme are drawn from the principal and line managers.

The Role Model

This subtheme highlights how the principal prioritizes teachers' psychological health by *role-modelling* expected behaviors and values while in the presence of line managers and teachers. Existing practices such as "all-staff meetings" and "staff duties" allow the principal to model these priorities by regularly emphasizing the significance of teacher psychological health through organizational communication. The regular delivery of these announcements at all-staff meetings was a powerful way to model the principal's ongoing commitment and support and to provide clear, consistent messaging. As a line manager said: "There'll be statements [by the principal at meetings] like, 'no work, keep off the computers, let's enjoy the long weekend or stay off your computer.' I think that's more visible in the school than it has been in the past" (SL4).

Teachers acknowledged that the principal's organizational communication can impact how other leaders behave and communicate with their staff, possibly passing on PSC within team environments. They also recognized the principal's influence on other leaders' management priority. As TFGP5 stated: "What is modelled at the top trickles down to other leaders. What the principal is modelling from the top, in terms of how they [leaders] speak to the teachers, the tone, and the way they go about speaking to us."

Staff duties (monitoring various parts of the school outside lesson times) are another practice and procedure that allows the principal to regularly serve as a *role model* in the presence of both leaders and employees. Participants (both teachers and leaders) appreciated the principal's informal interactions with staff and how these interactions reflect the principal's interest in and care for teachers. An experienced line manager gave this perspective:

One of the practices that I really value is the principal's help with the morning duty ... You know, the opportunity for so many connections. It wouldn't be there if the principal's model were, "I'm leadership, I stay at the office." (SL5)

Genuinely connecting with staff and line managers through their duty responsibilities not only shapes perceptions of the principal's management priority but can also influence how line managers shape PSC within their own teams. As such, the principal's role-modeling during all-staff meetings and duties facilitates a trickle-down effect that multiple participants believed influenced how line managers operationalize school practices.

The Advocate

This subtheme focuses on how the principal prioritizes teacher psychological health by endorsing the "school charter" and the school's "wellbeing committee." The school's five-year charter includes a "staff wellbeing as a good employer" section. This section of the charter highlights employees' needs by developing a staff wellbeing strategy (OD13). However, for the "staff wellbeing as a good employer" section to effectively protect teachers' psychological health, it requires strong *advocacy*. As the primary *advocate*, findings suggest that the principal endorses the school charter so that line managers operationalize and incorporate this section into their own leadership practice.

The "staff wellbeing as a good employer" section is vital for facilitating the transfer of PSC. This section of the school charter provides the principal with a clear reference point and a strong mandate to promote and integrate these elements through management priority and organizational communication in setting goals with other school leaders and staff. Therefore, as *the advocate* for the school charter, the principal's advocacy encourages "buy-in" from line managers so it can be successfully practised across the school. However, as a participant pointed out, persuading line managers to adopt and implement policies in practice can be challenging:

When we [line managers] come to leadership meetings, it's one thing to nod [in front of the principal] and say, 'Yeah, we will be committing to it,' but when you go to your little fiefdom [team] in the school, you run it as you wish – we [line managers] have so much autonomy. (SL2)

This quote suggests that the principal's advocacy for the "staff wellbeing as a good employer" component is crucial to shaping the management priority and commitment of line managers by supporting them in implementing these schoolwide goals amongst their teams.

Evidence indicates that the "wellbeing committee" is another school-level initiative that can protect teachers' psychological health, but which also relies heavily on the principal's *advocacy* to be effective. The

committee's scope and influence within the school have increased significantly, largely because the principal supported its stronger focus on teachers' psychological health. This advocacy has facilitated the expansion of the committee's remit by conducting surveys and focus groups, strengthening organizational participation, and seeking staff views on working conditions, the challenges they face, and the mentoring and leadership support they receive (OD19). The results have prompted meaningful school-wide changes, such as the wellbeing committee's mediation services, fewer weekly meetings, increased flexibility around extracurricular commitments, and remote work options during non-contact periods. Teachers appreciated that staff could provide anonymous feedback, which could lead to changes in areas such as workloads and the job design of teachers' roles. As P17 outlined: "We've done surveys, and they [leaders across the school] actively try to change things. Like they made some of our meetings personal wellbeing time." The changes described above align with the school's "Policies and Procedures" document, which outlines its commitment to flexible working arrangements and, where possible, improvements to working conditions for staff (OD15).

Acting Behind the Scenes

This subtheme underscores the principal's impact on line managers in settings where teachers are not present. It recognizes the "principal's mentoring sessions" and the "leadership meetings" as key practices and procedures that happen *behind the scenes*. The principal has multiple direct reports, who serve as line managers across the school's four teams. They meet regularly through one-on-one mentoring and group leadership meetings, promoting communication and participation in H&S at all levels of leadership. An important purpose of these *behind-the-scenes* sessions is to encourage line managers to support teachers' psychological health amongst their respective teams.

The principal recognizes that mentoring sessions and leadership meetings can impact how other line managers lead, particularly in relation to management priority, and management commitment and support. As a result, the structure and objectives of leadership meetings and principal mentoring sessions could shape the extent to which line managers prioritize teachers' psychological health in team and individual contexts.

We have leadership meetings and a mentoring structure . . . which involves meeting regularly with the people [line managers] who have influence over others. So, the way I approach that, I feel, then sets the tone for how they, in turn, mentor and support their members of staff. (SL1)

The goals that line managers set during mentoring sessions often include components related to teachers' psychological health or teacher support, which could lead to the implementation of a new policy or procedure within the teams they lead. As SL5 explained:

The current principal is very big on wellbeing. I think it definitely becomes something that is of high priority in the team it's dealt with, and teacher psychological health is considered to be quite important . . . And when I speak to the principal, he'll ask "how's things?" And it's not only about how things are at school, but also how everything is, what's going on? . . . We'll have that chat. Then we'll go into some of the goals that are set up, but it's that check-in – what's hot, what's not?

As the quote above suggests, the principal's care and interest in matters extend beyond student-focused outcomes, emphasizing the principal's management priority. This school-level approach indicates that the principal is interested in the welfare of line managers, but also that there is an expectation that they adopt a similar approach when mentoring and leading their own staff in team and individual settings.

Leadership meetings are another *behind-the-scenes* practice that helps the principal reinforce the importance of management priority to the line managers present. These meetings create opportunities for the principal to initiate organizational communication and for line managers to collectively consider ideas and solutions related to psychosocial hazards. [Figure 1](#) illustrates how the principal's management priority initiated a *behind-the-scenes* discussion at a leadership meeting with line managers about the ongoing issues the school's holistic reporting system poses for teachers' workloads. This discussion highlighted the need for organizational participation, which encouraged the leadership team to consider the feedback and implement an effective intervention to address the workload issue.

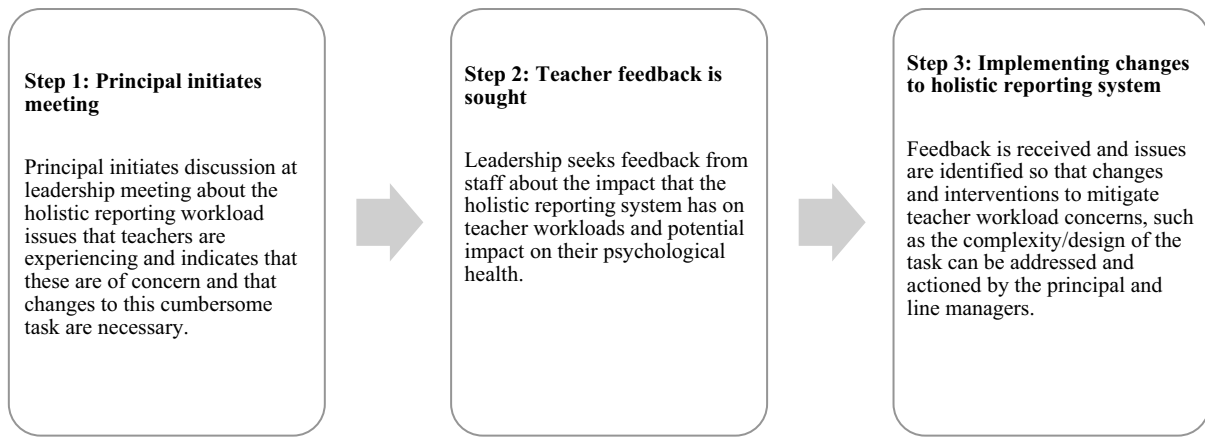


Figure 1. Example of a “behind-the-scenes” process.

Line Managers’ Influence

Data suggest that line managers can be influential in operationalizing team and individual-level policies and procedures that facilitate PSC transfer within team settings, supporting the development of the *line managers’ influence* primary theme. This primary theme comprises the *personalized approach*, *supportive approach*, and *leader discrepancies* subthemes, which also emerged inductively from the data. The *personalized and supportive approaches* subthemes represent the leadership approaches of line managers that influence the operationalization of team and individual level policies and procedures they are responsible for implementing for the benefit of their staff. Conversely, the “*leader discrepancies*” subtheme represents professional learning communities (PLCs) and line managers’ mentoring sessions that are not effectively operationalized, and which may contribute to negative perceptions of team and individual-level PSC transfer.

Personalized Approach

This subtheme explores how house leaders operationalize and transfer team and individual-level PSC through the line manager’s mentoring program. Line manager mentoring involves face-to-face sessions with teachers, as well as day-to-day support within team settings, and is structured to each teacher’s individual needs. For example, beginning teachers (with less than two years of service) meet with their mentor (assigned line manager) once a fortnight, while teachers with more than two years of experience meet about once or twice a term.

Through a *personalized approach*, mentoring can provide individual guidance and opportunities for teachers to set relevant goals for their teaching practice, which may also positively impact teacher wellbeing. When effective, line manager mentoring sessions are particularly valued by beginning teachers. As TFGP5 highlights: “Although mentors have specific things on their agenda, their goal is also to help you grow. My mentor is really great, such as giving lots of feedback.” The schoolwide mentoring documentation used by line managers and teachers indicates that mentoring serves as the school’s professional growth cycle reflection tool (appraisal system), enabling both parties to monitor and assess various aspects of teacher practice (OD8/9/10).

The mentoring schedule and reflection tool, completed throughout the year, highlight the importance of teachers being able to freely discuss their needs, voice concerns, and seek appropriate assistance from their line managers. The school document includes aspects of the role, such as promoting collegiality and collaboration, as well as seeking and acting on mentor feedback (OD8/10). As such, the mentoring relationship can encourage individual teachers to discuss matters that may also impact their psychological health, such as workload issues, classroom stressors, and work-life balance concerns.

Supportive Approach

This subtheme is exemplified by sustained support for teachers' psychological health. In interviews and focus groups, participants discussed PLCs as a practice through which line managers can offer a *supportive approach* by collectively addressing issues that may also impact teachers' psychological H&S. PLCs consist of line managers and teachers who meet weekly in teams to discuss student achievement and staff concerns. A beginner teacher said, "Having PLCs means that many of our discussions are around teachers being able to identify issues. For example, it's not just happening in my class, and then being able to identify and have discussions about which strategy might work" (P16).

As illustrated above, line managers play a key role in fostering a positive PLC environment, which helps teachers feel safe expressing the challenges they face in their roles. Therefore, a supportive approach in PLC meetings fosters open and reciprocal communication in team settings. This level of support, as shown by line managers in PLCs, allows teachers to speak more freely, knowing they are being listened to by line managers and their colleagues. Furthermore, a supportive approach can lead to the implementation of effective team and individual-level practices and procedures, such as addressing student engagement and achievement issues.

Interview data showed that a supportive approach is experienced through regular positive interactions between teachers and line managers. These interactions may strengthen relationships and create a setting where teachers can share concerns about teaching, learning, and other issues, thereby promoting organizational communication and reinforcing management commitment and support. As P13 explained, "My leader [line manager] acknowledges my presence, calls me by my name. She asks me how I am, whether she can be of any support, and how my students are doing." Even brief interactions foster safe dialogue and trust, allowing teachers to voice concerns such as administrative burdens and behavioral issues. These discussions can facilitate the exchange of ideas and further exploration during mentoring or PLC meetings, so that issues are shared and addressed amongst colleagues.

Leader Discrepancies

While not a leadership approach, this subtheme emerged from data indicating that the prioritization of teachers' psychological health can vary across the school's four teams and within each team, as co-leaders lead each team. Thus, varying levels of line manager management priority, and commitment and support can influence how each leader interprets and operationalizes the specific practices and procedures they are responsible for implementing. For example, some participants raised concerns about inconsistencies in mentoring practices among line managers, which influenced outcomes and perceptions, potentially limiting the operationalization and transfer of PSC.

I think it really depends on the leader [mentor]. Some are really good at helping teachers out, and they can tell when you need help. Some, you need to go up and ask for help, be really explicit, and then perhaps that might still not happen. And some are really good at just being a listening ear. But my mentor this year – I'm struggling with him because he constantly talks over me. (FGP7)

The way mentoring sessions are structured and the relationship a teacher has with their mentor outside these sessions can influence teachers' perceptions of the line manager's effectiveness as a mentor and the extent to which they prioritize teachers' psychological health over other school priorities, such as student academic and pastoral outcomes.

Participants also noted significant *discrepancies* in how line managers run weekly PLC meetings and their potential impact on perceptions of team and individual-level PSC. As the quote below suggests, significant discrepancies in line management practices can impact organizational communication and participation in H&S activities.

With some leaders . . . we're just like, right, how can we do better [for students]? Whereas, with others, it always opens up to, 'How are you doing, how are we feeling with our classes' - in terms of how you feel you're doing as a teacher, and what can we do to support that? (P16)

These inconsistencies in how line managers interpret and operationalize policies and procedures, such as mentoring and PLC meetings, contribute to variations in perceptions of team and individual-level PSC. While some line managers incorporated teachers' psychological health objectives into their mentoring and

PLC meetings and daily interactions, others focused primarily on student outcomes, which participants recognized as a lack of management priority, and commitment and support.

Since line managers are responsible for interpreting and relaying the school's vision to their teams, how they run PLC meetings and mentoring sessions can influence the extent to which PSC is transferred across their teams. As LMFGP1 points out, line managers' willingness to adopt and effectively operationalize school-wide policies, practices and procedures can often determine how well PSC can transfer within a team.

If you have a leader [line manager] who doesn't buy into a particular initiative, that team will never gain momentum in that particular initiative . . . If my buy-in isn't there, it translates into PLC discussions in terms of how much time I give it on my agenda, and it translates then to teachers and the learners, and what they [line managers] prioritise.

The findings indicate that if a line manager does not prioritize teachers' psychological H&S in PLC meetings and mentoring sessions, teachers' perceptions of team and individual-level PSC are likely to be adversely impacted. More importantly, what occurs during these interactions also influences teacher behavior, as they may be more hesitant to seek support or participate in organizational participation if the issue they face relates to their psychological H&S. The above quote also emphasizes the degree of autonomy that house leaders have in leading their PLC meetings and mentoring sessions and how this can impact perceptions of PSC transfer.

Discussion

The Principal's Role in Setting the Conditions for Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC)

This investigation highlights the underexplored role of principals in enabling line managers to enact PSC by role-modeling psychosocial safety practices. Participants noted that championing PSC through all-staff meetings and duties signaled management commitment via organizational communication, fostering openness, support, safety, connection, and positive classroom environments (Adams, 2023; Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). These findings extend earlier research showing that principals' prioritization of management support and communication enhances support for teachers (Yulita et al., 2017) by demonstrating how principals shape line managers' practices. While consistent with evidence that top management commitment reduces psychosocial hazards and promotes a health-oriented environment (Inoue et al., 2023; Mirza et al., 2023), and that regular signaling reinforces psychosocial safety priorities (Parent-Lamarche & Biron, 2022), this study demonstrates how such commitment is implemented via routine school practices initiated by the principal.

The principal's advocacy for the "teacher wellbeing as a good employer" section in the school charter encouraged line managers and staff to implement it consistently within team settings. This advocacy supported another principal-endorsed initiative: the staff wellbeing committee, which had an explicit focus on psychological health through an expanded remit. These changes transformed the committee's original purpose of organizing social events into developing preventive measures to protect teachers' psychological health, which Tappin et al. (2023) describe as a shift from providing peripheral "nice to have" wellness activities to implementing practices that assess and address psychosocial risks. The expanded remit enabled the committee to conduct wellbeing surveys and focus groups, helping teachers discuss workplace issues – potentially informing future policies (Loh et al., 2019). As the school's key power actor, the principal supported meaningful changes to teachers' working conditions, such as remote work options and fewer meetings. While Tuckey et al. (2022) identify power actors as influential in PSC transfer, this study highlights how the principal's advocacy supported line managers to promote teachers' mental health through targeted initiatives.

Furthermore, behind-the-scenes mentoring and leadership meetings helped create a positive PSC for addressing concerns relating to teachers' psychological health. This finding reinforces Ahlin's (2025) claim that the principal can cultivate workplace settings that foster shared leadership and decision-making processes. While line managers can both drive and impede organizational health interventions (Biron et al., 2019), the present study demonstrates that principal mentoring sessions and leadership meetings are

key mechanisms for promoting and transferring PSC in areas under their influence. These forums enable the principal to emphasize the importance of managing psychosocial hazards and implementing targeted interventions, such as addressing student behavioral issues, engagement, and teacher workloads, thereby encouraging line managers to model similar and consistent support for teachers. In turn, these practices strengthen organizational PSC and equip line managers with the resources needed to develop team-level PSC (Biron et al., 2018).

Line Managers' Operationalizing/Diluting PSC Through Team Practices

When line managers adopted a personalized approach, they integrated psychological health into their mentoring practice by addressing teacher wellbeing alongside performance and student outcomes through one-on-one discussions and goal-setting. This finding supports earlier research that mentoring should address both psychosocial and career development needs of teachers (Peters, 2010). Positive PSC environments encourage employees to access resources and raise concerns with their line managers (Loh et al., 2019). In a mentoring context, this may involve teachers seeking support during onboarding or requesting additional professional development to address specific challenges. By demonstrating management commitment and support, and organizational communication, mentoring can strengthen individual-level PSC over time (Loh et al., 2024), particularly when timely and appropriate mentoring support is offered to teachers facing challenging situations.

Participants valued line managers' supportive approach to fostering an inclusive, collaborative, and psychologically safe environment in which teachers feel supported and confident to engage in H&S activities. Although broadly consistent with previous research concerning the management of psychosocial risks (Backström & Berglund, 2022; Liggett, 2024; Tripney et al., 2024), the present study further clarifies this process by showing that positive perceptions of team and individual-level PSC develop when line managers create opportunities for teachers to raise concerns in PLCs, thereby facilitating targeted initiatives that support psychological health. Thus, a positive PLC environment relies on line managers adopting a supportive approach and establishing conditions in which teachers feel safe to participate in discussions and decisions, thereby supporting a health-focused setting.

Additionally, this study extends current understanding by showing that PSC is not uniformly transferred from the principal to teachers but may be diluted at the line-management level, through leadership discrepancies in mentoring and PLC practices contributing to varied perceptions of PSC across teams. When PLC meetings and mentoring sessions lacked an explicit focus on psychological health, teacher participants largely interpreted these behaviors as indicating that the line manager's management priority was low. These perceptions may stem from a teacher's perspective that line management is responsible for implementing practices and procedures (e.g., PLC meetings and mentoring) that shape team-level PSC (Escartín et al., 2021). The findings also suggest the school's co-leadership structure may influence how PSC is operationalized by line managers. When leaders differed in their approach to facilitating PLC meetings and mentoring teachers, perceptions of leadership discrepancy may be reinforced. Because responsibility for these practices is shared under co-leadership arrangements, variation in leadership effectiveness may contribute to differences in both team and individual-level PSC.

Links to the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

The present research reinforces earlier literature linking PSC to the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, in which PSC functions as an organizational resource, accumulating and linking resources to acquire and protect additional resources (Loh et al., 2021). For example, the school's wellbeing committee facilitated the development of staff mediation services, the wellbeing survey, and focus groups. In turn, these initiatives led to fewer weekly meetings, greater flexibility around extracurricular commitments, and remote work options during non-contact periods. Resource accumulation occurs because PSC operates within a dynamic social context critical to its preservation (Hobfoll, 2014). In the current study, the school's positive foundational PSC environment enabled a resource-caravan passageway effect, which contributed to additional resources that appeared to improve teachers' working conditions.

At the team level, line managers played a key role in translating organizational resources into local resource-caravan passageways. Effective PLC meetings, teacher mentoring, and everyday PLC interactions

help teachers access professional guidance, social support, problem-solving assistance, and emotional reassurance. These resources can protect vulnerable teachers from loss spirals linked to limited leadership support and rising workload pressures. For example, psychologically healthy PLCs may encourage teachers to raise concerns and engage in H&S activities, contributing to more meaningful mentoring, workload adjustments, and collaborative problem-solving. Consistent with COR theory, a single supportive practice can mobilize additional resources, creating a resource gain spiral (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In contrast, accounts of leadership discrepancies in PLC meetings and house leader mentoring suggest loss spirals, in which teachers in lower-functioning teams experience further resource depletion.

Multilevel Policies, Practices, and Procedures Model

The case-derived Multilevel Policies, Practices and Procedures Model in Figure 2 shows how school leaders use leadership approaches to implement key policies and procedures, supporting PSC transfer across school, team, and individual levels. The larger circle on the left represents the principal's influence in setting the scene, underscoring the principal's foundational role in championing conditions for school-level PSC. As the role model and advocate for PSC, the principal actively promotes teacher psychological H&S behind the scenes. These leadership approaches (in bold) help the principal operationalize key policies and procedures (in italics) to facilitate the transfer of PSC across the school's four teams.

Each small circle represents one of the school's four co-led teams. Their position on the larger circle's perimeter reflects their connection to school policies and procedures despite their semi-autonomous leadership arrangement. The right circle shows line managers' influence, emphasizing that personalized and supportive leadership approaches help operationalize and transfer PSC at team and individual levels. Each team's semi-autonomous leadership arrangement grants line managers significant discretion in how they interpret policies and procedures, which may contribute to discrepancies and variation in perceptions of team and individual PSC across the four teams.

The black arrow represents the PSC transfer flow from the principal's prioritization of teacher psychological H&S (school-level PSC) to line managers' operationalization of team and individual-level PSC within their respective teams. While outside the scope of the current study, it is plausible that the relationship could be bidirectional, thereby forming a reinforcing/feedback loop. For example, a successful initiative that safeguards teachers' psychological wellbeing, created collaboratively at the team level in PLC settings, is then rolled out throughout the school and approved by the principal for other teams to follow, suggesting a potential reinforcing/feedback-loop scenario.

The two gray arrows illustrate how policies and procedures create a resource-caravan passageway across school, team, and individual levels (Hobfoll et al., 2018), enabling access to support and resources (Zadow et al., 2023). In this study, effective policies or procedures were shown to support and enhance existing resources. For example, successful mentoring that promotes organizational communication and participation in H&S activities may establish a new communication channel between teachers and line managers and provide resources such as regular support for managing psychosocial hazards.

Study's Limitations, Contributions, and Recommendations for Future Research

As this qualitative case study focused on a single school, comparative studies across a wider range of schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand and globally, including quantitative investigations using psychometric scales to evaluate the key concepts, would enhance the model's generalizability and help determine how PSC is transferred across different educational contexts. Examining schools with alternative policies, practices, and procedures would also deepen understanding of the mechanisms that support or hinder PSC transfer. This study was conducted in a school with a relatively positive PSC, so future research in schools with lower PSC levels would provide important complementary insights, offering a fuller picture of how PSC can be strengthened across diverse school environments. In addition, it is interesting to note that unlike the predominantly quantitative PSC literature, which has mostly explored links between PSC and outcomes such as employee psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, work engagement, and job satisfaction, participants in this study rarely mentioned these outcomes directly. However, this is probably not surprising given the bounded nature of this qualitative case study, and as such should not be taken as evidence that these outcomes were not necessarily important to the participants.

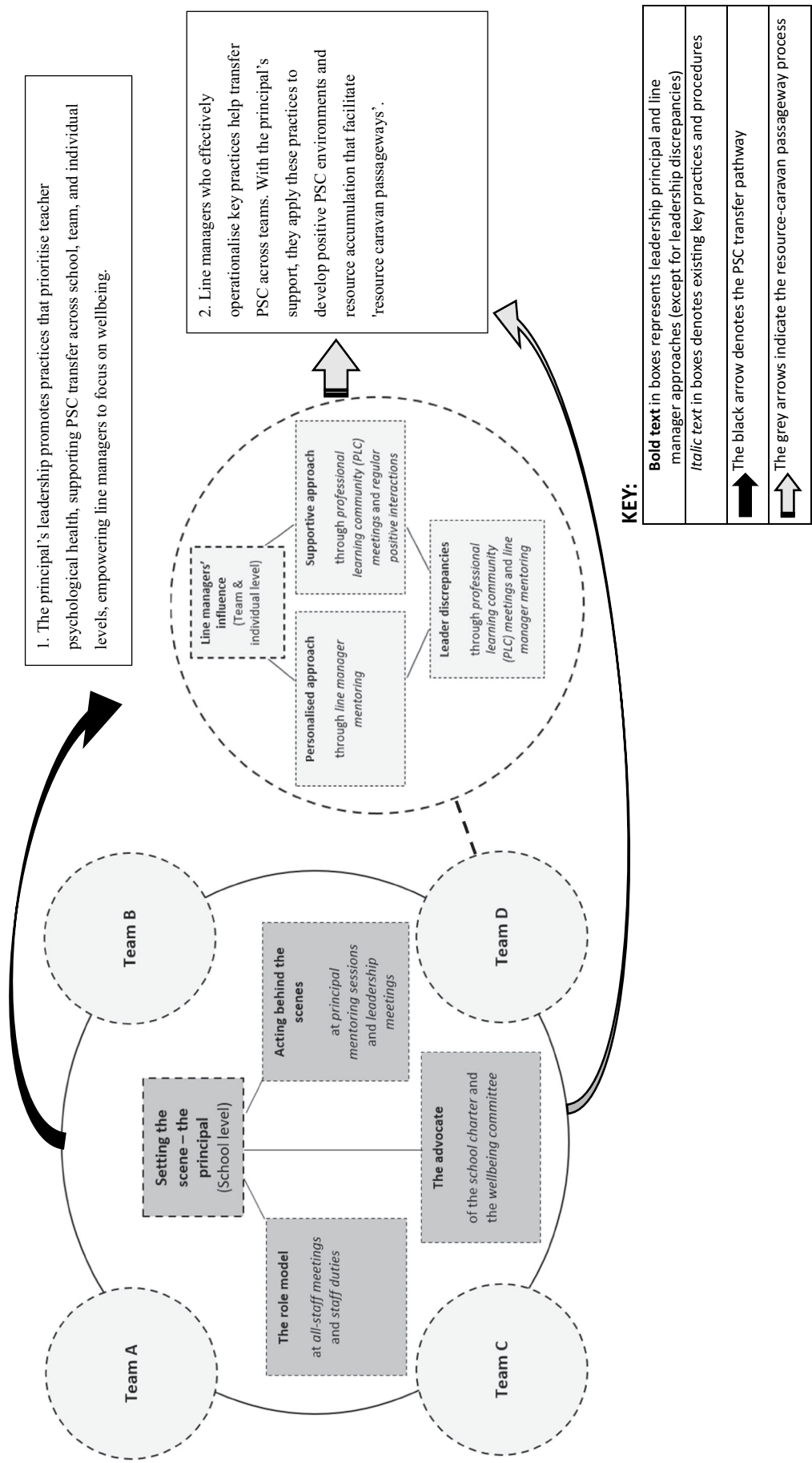


Figure 2. Multilevel model of key policies, practices, and procedures.

This study addressed a unique gap in the literature, as it is the first to explore how a principal empowers line management to operationalize and transfer PSC across and within teams. This extends research that has focused on PSC at school and individual levels and on principals' influence on teacher psychological health (e.g., Viseu et al., 2025; Yulita, Idris, & Abdullah, 2022) by showing how leadership across levels facilitates PSC operationalization and transfer within schools.

Additionally, this study offers a clear and recent illustration of PSC as a critical upstream organizational factor and an antecedent of the broader psychosocial work environment experienced by employees, consistent with earlier research (Afsharian et al., 2019). While the present investigation was unable to examine variables relating to the causation of PSC transfer, its findings provide valuable insights into school leaders' practices and capabilities and how they protect teachers' psychological H&S. Hence, this study makes a distinctive theoretical contribution by demonstrating that PSC is transferred through the dual roles of the principal and line managers, whose leadership approaches enable the operationalization of policies and procedures that prioritize teacher psychological H&S. As such, the findings suggest that developing specific leadership approaches can improve the consistency with which line managers facilitate PSC transfer across multiple school teams.

To illustrate how different school leaders can develop workplace settings that facilitate and transfer PSC across multiple teams, this study proposed the *"Multilevel Policies, Practices and Procedures Model"* (see Figure 2), which shows how each leadership approach can support teachers' psychological health by facilitating PSC transfer at the team and individual levels. This study's insights offer practical guidance for the design of school leader roles (principal and line managers) and for strengthening capabilities through specific leadership approaches (e.g., *role-model* and *supportive*) that promote a positive PSC workplace. In turn, these principal and line manager leadership approaches provide leaders with a clear and actionable foundation for co-constructing targeted, timely key practices and procedures, while also enabling the effective transfer of PSC in ways that benefit teams and individual teachers. The model could be generalized to other school contexts to enhance its utility. Future longitudinal research could test whether the relationships are bidirectional, enabling quantitative validation of feedback loops within the model. It could also examine how each practice and procedure relates to the four PSC domains, further extending and refining the model's scope.

Identifying key policies and procedures and understanding how they support PSC transfer has practical implications for school leader job design, as it highlights how the principal and line managers can intentionally embed teacher psychological health priorities into everyday practices and tasks. Importantly, this study extends the PSC literature by demonstrating how a school's existing policies, practices, and procedures can serve as drivers through which principals and line managers can operationalize and transfer PSC. The findings suggest that stronger alignment with PSC principles can enhance leadership capability, particularly among line managers, for whom ongoing support through practices such as mentoring is critical to setting meaningful teacher goals and promoting effective professional development. While quantitative research has established that PSC predicts employee job design outcomes (Lawrie et al., 2018), little is known about how organizational-level PSC, set by the principal, shapes line managers' job design. The present study highlights this as an important avenue for future research, as greater understanding could further inform the design and implementation of line managers' roles and responsibilities to promote teachers' psychological health.

Conclusion

This study recognizes the growing scarcity of resources and the structural constraints faced by schools, leaders, and staff in establishing a positive PSC environment. Teachers face increased workloads, longer hours, and greater stress (Hofmann et al., 2022; Stacey et al., 2020). The profession is increasingly unpredictable, complex, and rapidly changing (Boström et al., 2020). Teachers have significant responsibilities, including developing personalized learning plans, providing pastoral support, and communicating regularly with parents and students. Role changes happen quickly, often without clear guidance or resources, under tight deadlines and rising societal expectations (McDonough et al., 2020). These challenges

may hinder principals and line managers from implementing practices that foster PSC and protect teachers' mental health.

However, our research illustrates how the principal in the participating school champions a positive PSC at the school level, empowering line managers to play a dual, pivotal role in operationalizing key policies, practices, and procedures that facilitate PSC transfer across the school's teams. The Multilevel Policies, Practices and Procedures Model illustrates this mechanism by mapping how effective leadership approaches create working conditions for leaders (at different levels) and teachers to co-construct measures to manage psychosocial risks. This process highlights the shared responsibility of the principal and line managers in establishing a positive school and team-level PSC that fosters resource-caravan passageways to protect and accumulate valuable resources. Importantly, this study shows that creating a positive PSC environment and supporting teachers' psychological health depend not only on the principal's commitment but also on the consistent actions of well-trained, supportive line managers. The findings underscore the importance of strengthening line managers' capabilities and provide a foundation for future research examining how school-level PSC influences their roles, practices, and leadership approaches.

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Author Contributions

CRedit: **Stefano Cataloni**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Darryl Forsyth**: Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **David Brougham**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Kaye Thorn**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Data Availability Statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

Ethical Approval Statement and Informed Consent Statements

This research received Ethics Approval from Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

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