



Supportive Leadership and Psychological Safety of Teachers in Secondary Schools in Kayunga District, Uganda

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Abstract

Psychological safety is increasingly recognised as an important factor in promoting teachers' wellbeing, collaboration, and effectiveness in schools. In secondary schools, head teachers' supportive leadership practices may influence the extent to which teachers feel psychologically safe in their work environment. Therefore, this study investigated how head teachers' supportive leadership influenced psychological safety of teachers in secondary schools in Kayunga District, Uganda. Specifically, the study examined the influence of supportive leadership in terms of empowerment, inspiration, fair treatment and recognition on psychological safety of teachers. Using the quantitative approach, the study employed correlational research design. Data were collected from a sample of 209 teachers using self-administered questionnaire. Using structural equation modelling (SEM), recognition, inspiration and fair treatment had a positive significant influence on psychological safety of teachers. However, empowerment had a positive but statistically insignificant influence. The study concluded that empowerment does not fundamentally influence teachers' psychological safety in secondary schools in Uganda, fair treatment plays a significant role in enhancing teachers' psychological safety, inspirational leadership significantly promotes psychological safety among teachers, and recognition is necessary to enhancing psychological safety among teachers. The study recommended that head teachers should strengthen empowerment-oriented leadership practices, ensure fair treatment in handling of teachers, deliberately adopt inspirational leadership practices, and institutionalise teacher recognition systems that consistently acknowledge teachers' efforts and contributions. The study provides practical insights for school administrators and education policymakers on leadership practices that can improve overall school environment, strengthening teachers' psychological safety.

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Introduction

The concept of psychological safety in workplaces refers to the mutual conviction that the work environment offers a psychologically safe atmosphere for interpersonal risks, including voicing concerns and asking questions, without being punished for doing so (Silva et al., 2025). The term "psychological safety" was coined by Rogers (1954) to refer

to the ability to be oneself without fear of negative consequences, leading to creativity and growth. Edmondson (1999) and Edmondson and Lei (2014) popularised the concept in their studies. According to Edmondson (1999), psychological safety represents an atmosphere within the team where people can feel secure when expressing themselves because of mutual respect and trust. Roy (2019) conceptualised it in terms of protection, social support, and encouragement among others. Protection is about safeguarding workers from harm, mistreatment, and unsafe working conditions. Social support is the sense of well-being that arises from receiving care, assistance, and encouragement from others, including family members, friends, or colleagues. Encouragement concerns supportive social acts that involve offering reassurance or affirmation to an individual in order to strengthen their hope, motivation, confidence, persistence, or courage.

Psychological safety is essential in the workplace because employees perform better when they feel secure and protected, and the work environment is characterized by limited conflicts and greater internal stability among employees, which promotes positive work outcomes (Rustamjonovich, 2021). Social support enables employees to cope with stressful life events by fostering a sense of belonging, acceptance, love, and emotional support. This, in turn, enhances employee motivation and well-being. Furthermore, when employees are encouraged, they develop reassurance, hope, confidence, persistence, motivation, and courage (Wong et al., 2025). Consequently, employees are more capable of progressing in positive and productive ways. With encouragement, individuals uplift one another, enabling them to navigate challenges and manage difficult situations effectively (Wong, 2015). Therefore, it is essential for organisations, including schools.

Despite the importance of psychological safety, there is still limited empirical evidence on it and its antecedents within the context of Ugandan secondary schools. Kyambade et al. (2025) considered university settings, while Kibedi et al. (2026) examined health workers and trainees on clinical placement in teaching hospitals. Paucity of empirical evidence in the context of secondary schools created a contextual gap in understanding how psychological safety manifests among secondary school teachers in Uganda. Since school environments differ significantly from universities and healthcare institutions, findings from these sectors were deemed to adequately explain the experiences of teachers in secondary schools hence this study. Nevertheless, within secondary schools in Uganda, head teachers, who play the role of institutional leaders, are responsible for creating psychological safety through nurturing an atmosphere of mutual trust and independence where teachers can freely air their opinions without any repercussions (Mpaata & Mpaata, 2019). Thus, basing on the Perceived Organisational Support, this study investigated how head teachers' supportive leadership influenced psychological safety of teachers considering the following hypotheses;

H₁: Empowerment has a positive significant influence on psychological safety of teachers.

H₂: Inspiration has a positive significant influence on psychological safety of teachers.

H₃: Fair treatment has a positive significant influence on psychological safety of teachers.

H₄: Recognition has a positive significant influence on psychological safety of teachers.

Theoretical Review

Theoretical Review

The Perceived Organizational Support Theory by Eisenberger et al. (1986) provided the framework for this study. This theory argues that workers tend to develop a generalized belief about the degree to which the organization cares about their performance and values them as individuals (Jeong & Kim, 2022). Accordingly, workers interpret the behaviour of management and organizational activities as a measure of the organization's commitment towards them (Maan et al., 2020). Perceived organisational support provides employees with assurance that the organisation will offer the necessary assistance during stressful situations. Such perceived organisational support enhances employees' job satisfaction, trust, and emotional security, which in turn promotes positive psychological outcomes (Li et al., 2022) including psychological safety. The theory suggests that organisational support is reflected through practices such as employee empowerment, inspiration, fair treatment, and recognition of employee contributions (Al-Hadrawi et al., 2023). Guided by the theory, this study examined how supportive leadership behaviours, namely empowerment, inspiration, fair treatment, and recognition contributed to the psychological safety of teachers.

Supportive Leadership and Psychological Safety

Supportive leadership is a leadership approach that prioritises addressing followers' needs and welfare while fostering a friendly and conducive work environment (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2025). Supportive leadership is defined by Siami et al. (2023) as how much support leaders provide to workers through their active participation in solving problems and behaving in a way that is honest and straightforward when dealing with subordinates. This type of leadership increases the workers' feelings of affiliation and involvement within the organization (Jameel et al., 2023). Furthermore, supportive leadership promotes a caring organisational climate associated with lower emotional exhaustion, greater resilience, improved teamwork, and enhanced psychological safety (Ip et al., 2025). Supportive leadership is characterised by four key leadership practices: empowerment, inspiration, fair treatment, and recognition (Al-Hadrawi, 2023; Ghatak, 2025). The review of related literature that follows involves analysis of the relationship of these dimensions with psychological safety.

Empowering Leadership and Psychological Safety

Empowering leadership refers to leaders' efforts to support employees by delegating authority and granting them autonomy in decision-making. This leadership style involves distributing managerial power to subordinates and organising the work environment in ways that enable employees to utilise their talents fully while removing barriers that hinder performance (Tankutay & Çolak, 2025). Empowering leaders thus provides a conducive work atmosphere where employees experience trust, importance, and psychological safety. Studies (e.g. Ahn & Park, 2026; Jalil et al., 2023; Joo et al., 2021; Piao & Hahn, 2025; Sivajee & Chandra, 2019) have reported that empowering leadership positively influences psychological safety. However, despite these findings, gaps that called for further analysis of the relationship between empowering leadership and psychological safety remain. For instance, all studies are skewed to Asian countries such as South Korea, China, Malaysia, and India, with limited evidence from African contexts, particularly Uganda. Also, the focus of the studies reviewed include sectors such as IT

firms, multinational companies and SMEs other than schools hence environments involving teachers have not been captured. Furthermore, a knowledge gap emerged as some studies were on psychological safety related variables such as wellbeing (Ahn & Park, 2026) and mental health (Jalil et al., 2023) suggesting limited studies on the same. These gaps attracted this study that involved secondary school teachers in Uganda.

Inspirational Leadership and Psychological Safety

Inspirational leadership is a leadership style involving leaders capturing the followers' minds through emotional connection by demonstrating vision, imagination, confidence, and a commitment to change (Kromsaenphim et al., 2025). Inspirational leaders communicate optimistic visions that align organisational and follower goals while deliberately fostering positive emotions among employees (Mitchell & Boyle, 2019). Studies (e.g. Arnold, 2017; Azila-Gbettor et al., 2024; Mohamed et al., 2025; Salas-Vallina et al., 2020) have reported that inspirational leadership positively influences psychological well-being and related concepts associated with psychological safety. However, gaps existed in the literature on inspirational leadership and psychological safety reviewed. First, the studies captured psychological safety-related concepts including employee well-being, happiness, and positive mood rather than directly examining psychological safety as an outcome variable. In addition, all the evidence was outside the education section and in developed economies, with one only study by Mohamed et al. (2025) done in the African context. Also, a knowledge gap emerged as some studies were on psychological safety-related variables that are wellbeing (Arnold, 2017; Azila-Gbettor et al., 2024; Mohamed et al. 2025) and happiness at work (Salas-Vallina et al., 2020) suggesting limited studies on the same. These gaps necessitated this study focussing on inspirational leadership and psychological safety in Ugandan secondary schools.

Fair Treatment and Psychological Safety

Fair treatment refers to respectful and equitable behaviour perceived by employees in their interactions with organisational decision-makers. It involves treating employees equally regardless of personal preferences or private relationships (Cho et al., 2025). Employees who perceive fairness within the workplace are more likely to comply with organisational directives and exhibit positive work attitudes (Cho et al., 2025). Studies (e.g. Amutuhaire et al., 2025; Cachón-Alonso & Elovainio, 2022; Ohana et al., 2024; Park et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2023) have reported that organisational justice is associated with psychological well-being and related outcomes linked to psychological safety. Nevertheless, while the above literature point to the relationship between fair treatment and psychological safety, gaps remained. First, all the studies examined organisational justice broadly without specifically focusing on leaders' fair treatment behaviours. Also, studies alluded to psychological safety through related variables such as mental health and psychological well-being rather than psychological safety directly. Furthermore, the studies revealed that empirical evidence from Uganda and other African countries remains scanty and the studies did not involve teachers despite differences in organisational culture and management systems. Also, a knowledge gap emerged as all the studies were on psychological safety-related variables that are psychological wellbeing (Amutuhaire et al., 2025), employee health (Cachón-Alonso & Elovainio, 2022), psychological strain (Ohana et al., 2024), psychological well-being (Park

et al., 2019) and psychological distress (Sun et al., 2023) suggesting limited empirical studies on the same. These gaps thus called for this study that involved secondary school teachers in Uganda.

Recognition and Psychological Safety

Employee recognition refers to the constructive feedback and appreciation employees receive based on their work performance, commitment, and dedication (Yang & Jiang, 2023). Through recognition, employees feel valued and appreciated by their superiors, which enhances positive psychological outcomes (Jo & Shin, 2025). Thus, employees who perceive recognition from their leaders are likely to develop psychological safety. Studies (e.g. Alahiane et al., 2023; Gerçek et al., 2026; Larkova, 2025; Merino & Privado, 2015; Weziak-Bialowolska & Bialowolski, 2022) have reported that employee recognition is associated with psychological well-being and related outcomes linked to psychological safety. However, while the literature above shows existence of empirical support for the relationship between employee recognition and psychological safety, several gaps remained. First, except for the study done in Morocco, all the other studies reviewed were conducted outside the African context, and Uganda in particular. In addition, the studies mainly focused on sectors such as hospitals, banking, insurance companies, and general public and private sector organisations, while the school environment, was not examined. Furthermore, a knowledge gap emerged as most studies were on psychological safety-related variables that are wellbeing (Merino & Privado, 2015), psychological health (Alahiane et al., 2023), mental well-being (Larkova, 2025) and quality of life (Weziak-Bialowolska & Bialowolski, 2022); suggesting limited empirical studies on the same. Therefore, these contextual and sectoral gaps justified the need for the current study involving secondary school teachers in Uganda.

Methodology

Research Design and Study Sample

The study adopted a quantitative approach aimed at generating and analysing numerical data to enable valid statistical inferences. Specifically, a correlational research design was employed to examine the association between supportive leadership and psychological safety. The design was employed because it facilitates the determining of the strength and direction of relationships between variables within a defined population (Lau, 2017). The target population consisted of 302 teachers drawn from 11 secondary schools in Kayunga District. Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table, a sample of 282 respondents was determined although the response rate was 74.1%, i.e., 209 teachers. Simple random sampling was used to obtain the sample which enhances representativeness of the findings and helped to minimize sample selection bias. Thus, each teacher in the population had an equal probability of inclusion in the study.

Data Collection

Teachers provided data through a structured self-administered questionnaire. Section A collected demographic characteristics, Section B examined psychological safety as the dependent variable, and Section C measured supportive leadership as the independent variable. Psychological safety was assessed in terms of encouragement, protection, and social support, indicators developed by Roy (2019); while supportive

leadership was measured in terms of empowerment, fair treatment, inspiration and recognition, whose indicators were obtained from different sources including empowerment from Arnold et al. (2000), inspiration from Pates et al. (2018), and fair treatment from Lim et al. (1988). The indicators were scaled on a five-point Likert-type scale, that is 1 (completely disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), and 5 (completely agree).

Data Quality Control

The validation of the instrument involved evaluating the items used to measure the constructs by computing the Content Validity Index (CVI) based on inter-judge evaluation. Five judges, who were lecturers in educational management, evaluated the items by assigning either “Relevant (R)” or “Irrelevant (IR)” rating to them. The scores obtained were then used to establish the CVI for the individual constructs. In all cases, the CVI values exceeded the minimum required value of 0.70 (Batalla et al., 2022), hence the instrument was considered to have satisfactory content validity. According to the judges’ comments, slight modifications were done to enhance clarity and relevancy among other items.

After data collection, Factor Analysis was used to assess common method bias using Harman’s single-factor test through unrotated principal component analysis. The results revealed that the first factor accounted for 43.97% of the variance for Psychological Safety and 40.12% for Supportive Leadership, both below the recommended threshold of 50%. Furthermore, four factors with eigenvalues greater than one emerged for Psychological Safety, and also four factors with eigenvalues greater than one emerged for Supportive Leadership. The emergence of multiple factors and the relatively low variance explained by the first factor indicate that common method bias was not a serious concern in this study (Rodríguez-Ardura & Meseguer-Artola, 2020). Thereafter, after measurement models were developed as presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Data Analysis Methods

The data collected were processed before analysis. This entailed coding of the questionnaires and entry of the data into SPSS. The data were then summarised into frequency tables which helped to identify missing data as well as outliers. Since none of the completed questionnaires had over 5% missing data, all cases were included (Hair Jr. et al., 2022). Missingness of data was tested using Little’s MCAR test as a means of identifying whether the dataset had any particular pattern of missing data. The data was found to be missing at MCAR and thus missing values were subjected to series mean imputation (Wongoutong, 2025). This ensured that data were fit for analysis. SmartPLS 4 was used to carry out Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to develop measurement and structural equation models. The measurement models established construct validity and reliability, whereas the structural model identified causal linkages between the variables.

Ethical Considerations

In the process of conducting this research, ethical research principles were observed. These included informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, as well as balancing the risks and benefits of the research. Informed consent was obtained from all the respondents before involving them in the study, and they were made aware of the objectives of the study as well as their freedom to choose whether to take part in the study or not. Anonymity was guaranteed to ensure that the respondents were protected in the process of collecting the data. Confidentiality of the data was achieved through presenting the results of the research using aggregated data, hence cannot be attributed to the respondents. Research approval was obtained from the Kyambogo University Research and Ethics Committee.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics of teachers

Analysis of background attributes of the respondents was carried out in relation to gender, age, level of education, length of service and job roles in the school. These results are captured in Table 1.

Table 1

Background Characteristics of the Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Sex	Male	101	48.3
	Female	108	51.7
	Total	209	100.0
Age	Below 30	46	22.0
	30-40	113	54.1
	40 above	50	23.9
	Total	209	100.0
Education	Diploma	38	18.2
	Degree	162	77.5
	Masters	9	4.3
	Total	209	100.0
Period	Less than 5 years	120	57.4
	5-10 years	63	30.1
	11 years	26	12.4
	Total	209	100.0
Responsibility	Subject teacher	92	44.0
	Class teacher	55	26.3
	Head of department	41	19.6
	Others	21	10.0
	Total	209	100.0

The results in Table 1 indicate that the distribution of teachers according to gender was virtually the same, where 48.3% were males, while the remaining 51.7% were females. However, the highest percentage of the sample comprised teachers in the age range of 30-40 years old (54.1%), while the second highest group was made up of teachers above 40 years old (23.9%), and 22.0% were those under the age of 30. Most of the teachers (77.5%) had a bachelor's degree, while a lower number of 18.2% had diplomas. Teachers having masters' degrees comprised 4.3% of the total. With respect

to experience, the majority (57.4%) of the teachers had been working for less than 5 years, 30.1% had been working for between 5 and 10 years, and 12.4% had worked for more than 11 years. These demographics of teachers provide a clear understanding of the participants that participated in the study.

Measurement Models

To establish the level at which respondents rated supportive leadership and psychological safety in schools, descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations (SD) were computed. Thereafter, to ascertain whether the data were suitable for structural equation modelling, measurement models were first assessed using validity (convergent validity and discriminant validity) and reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability) tests. Convergent validity was evaluated using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while discriminant validity was assessed using the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations. Reliability was examined using Composite Reliability (CR). The results follow in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2

Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio Correlations for Discriminant Validity

Measures	Means	SD	AVE	PS	EM	FT	IS	RE
PS	4.11	0.532	0.511					
EM	4.12	0.593	0.620	0.899				
FT	3.99	0.608	0.560	0.881	0.735			
IS	4.22	0.574	0.757	0.825	0.855	0.753		
RE	4.01	0.597	0.695	0.805	0.875	0.644	0.897	

Key: EM = Empowerment, FT = Fair Treatment, IS = Inspiration, PS = Psychological Safety, RE = Recognition

The descriptive results in Table 2 show that the supportive leadership and psychological safety were rated highly by the teachers. The mean values varied between 3.99 and 4.22, implying that the majority of the respondents agreed to existence of supportive leadership and psychological safety in the schools. In particular, inspiration was ranked the highest with the mean value of 4.22 (SD = 0.574), while empowerment, psychological safety, recognition, and fair treatment came second, third, fourth, and fifth, respectively, with the mean values of 4.12 (SD = 0.593), 4.11 (SD = 0.532), 4.01 (SD = 0.597), and 3.99 (SD = 0.608), respectively. Validity results revealed that all constructs achieved acceptable levels of convergent validity of above 0.5, affirming that the indicators sufficiently explained their respective constructs. The HTMT ratios were also below the recommended coefficients of 0.90 (Hair Jr. et al., 2022). This confirmed discriminant validity, meaning that the constructs were empirically distinct. In all, the above results confirm that the measurement model demonstrated adequate validity and that the results were appropriate for further structural analysis.

Table 3*Reliability for the Study Constructs*

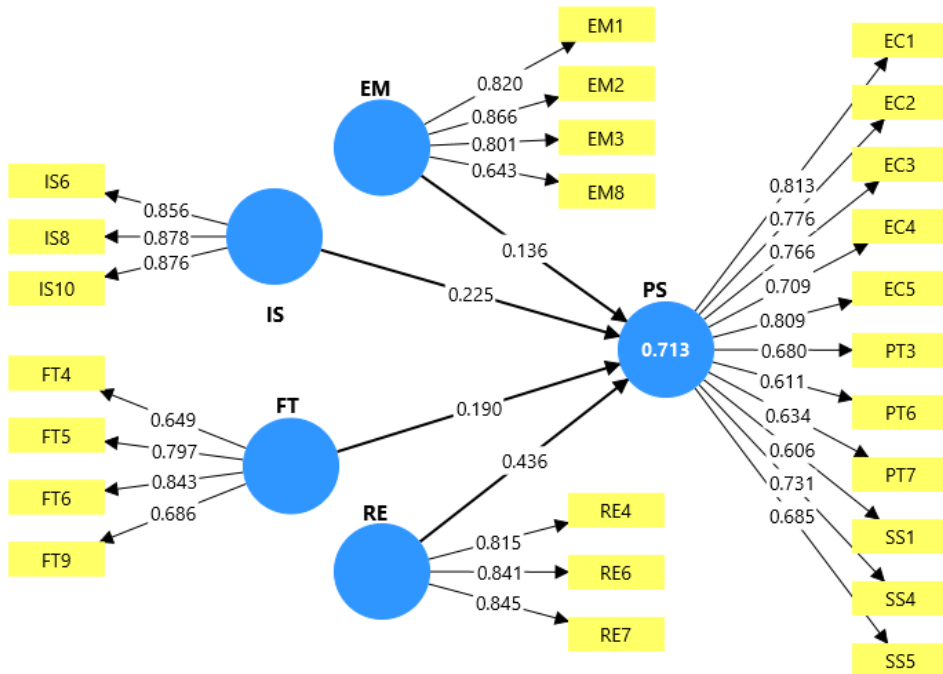
Measures	α	CR	VIF
Psychological Safety	0.903	0.919	
Encouragement	0.790	0.866	2.844
Fair treatment	0.732	0.834	2.270
Inspiration	0.840	0.903	2.143
Recognition	0.782	0.873	2.019

The reliability results (Table 3) reveal that all constructs were below the threshold for composite reliability (CR > 0.70) for both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Both tests were carried out because composite reliability alpha unlike the former, considers the actual factor loadings of each item, that is, recognises that items contribute differently. However, Cronbach's alpha assumes that all items have similar traits hence load equally, which makes it less accurate and lower reliability values. These results confirm that the items used to measure each construct were consistent and dependable. In addition, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged from 2.019 to 2.844, which are below the recommended threshold of 5.0, suggesting the absence of multicollinearity among the indicators (Hair Jr. et al., 2022). Therefore, the constructs were independent, hence there were collinearity issues.

Structural Model for Supportive Leadership and Psychological Safety

The structural equation model illustrates both the measurement model (outer model) and the structural relationships (inner model) between supportive leadership dimensions and psychological safety. The model retained only items with acceptable factor loadings, indicating their strong contribution to their respective constructs as indicated in Figure 1.

The structural equation model (Figure 1) shows that the study related supportive leadership and psychological safety of teachers. All items that loaded above 0.40 were retained (Hair et al., 2022). Accordingly, supportive leadership was studied in terms of empowerment (EM), fair treatment (FT), inspiration (IS), and recognition (RE). On the other hand, psychological safety covered encouragement (EC), protection (PT), and social support (SS). For psychological safety, all the three dimensions, namely; encouragement, protection, and social support were retained, although several items were dropped due to low factor loadings. Under encouragement, five out of eight items were retained, namely; I am allowed to express my feelings without any fear of consequences (EC1) (0.813), my head teacher encourages me to do well (EC2) (0.776), my head teacher provides encouragement (EC3) (0.766), my head teacher makes good comments about me (EC4) (0.709), and I am encouraged to do well in activities beyond teaching (EC5) (0.809).

Figure 1*Structural Model for Supportive Leadership and Psychological Safety of Teachers*

Regarding the protection dimension, three out of nine items were retained, namely; I am supported to perform my tasks well (PT3) (0.680), school authorities protect me if colleagues misbehave with me (PT6) (0.611), and I feel the same as my colleagues in the school (PT7) (0.634). With respect to social support, three out of five items were retained, namely; my colleagues help me when I need help especially when trying new approaches in my teaching (SS1) (0.731), if I present a problem to my head teacher, I am taken seriously and helped (SS4) (0.606), and my teaching team often collaborate and share resources to enhance teaching practices (SS5) (0.685). Overall, the retained items suggest that psychological safety is mainly reflected through open expression, institutional protection, and collaborative support within the school environment.

The model further shows that for supportive leadership, all the four dimensions, namely; empowerment, inspiration, fair treatment, and recognition were retained, though some items were dropped. For empowerment, four out of nine items were retained, namely; my head teacher provides advice for professional development (EM1) (0.820), pays attention to workgroup efforts (EM2) (0.866), encourages us to solve problems together (EM3) (0.801), and teaches us how to solve problems on our own (EM8) (0.643). For inspiration, three out of ten items were retained, namely; provides the team with hope for a better future (IS6) (0.856), provides inspiration and positive energy (IS8) (0.878), and is committed to goal achievement (IS10) (0.876), whereas IS1, IS2, IS3, IS4, IS5, IS7, and IS9 were excluded. With respect to fair treatment, four out of nine items were retained, namely; refrains from improper remarks or comments (FT4)

(0.649), communicates details in a timely manner (FT5) (0.797), treats group members as equals (FT6) (0.843), and finds time to chat with workgroup members (FT9) (0.686). Lastly, for recognition, three out of ten items were retained, namely; respects me as a unique person (RE4) (0.815), is aware of my hard work and commitment (RE6) (0.841), and compliments me on how persistent I am at work (RE7) (0.845). These findings indicate that supportive leadership is best explained through behaviours that promote professional support, inspiration, fairness, and recognition of teachers' efforts. The detailed hypotheses results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Path Estimates for Supportive Leadership and Psychological Safety

	B	T	p
Empowerment -> Psychological Safety	0.136	1.563	0.118
Fair treatment -> Psychological Safety	0.190	2.097	0.036
Inspiration -> Psychological Safety	0.225	2.474	0.013
Recognition -> Psychological Safety	0.436	5.667	0.000

R² = 0.713
R² Adjusted = 0.707

The results (Table 4) of the structural model reveal that supportive leadership explains a substantial proportion of the variance in psychological safety (R² = 0.713). This implies that approximately 71.3% of the variation in psychological safety is accounted for by the four leadership dimensions. However, the significant factors namely, fair treatment, inspiration and recognition contributed 70.7% (R² Adjusted = 0.707). Among the predictors, recognition had the strongest and most significant influence on psychological safety ($\beta = 0.436$, $p < 0.001$), followed by inspiration ($\beta = 0.225$, $p = 0.013$), and fair treatment ($\beta = 0.190$, $p = 0.036$) respectively. However, empowerment had a positive but statistically insignificant influence ($\beta = 0.136$, $p = 0.118$). Therefore, while hypothesis one (H1) was rejected, hypotheses two to four (H2-H4) were accepted. Precisely, the findings suggest that recognition is the most influential factor in enhancing psychological safety, followed by inspiration and fair treatment respectively.

Discussion

The findings showed that empowerment had a positive but statistically insignificant effect on psychological safety. This finding contradicts the Perceived Organisational Support Theory by Eisenberger (1986), which argues that employees develop emotional security and positive psychological outcomes when they are empowered. The finding also contradicts previous studies (e.g. Ahn & Park, 2026; Jalil et al., 2023; Joo et al., 2021; Piao & Hahn, 2025; Sivajee & Chandra (2019) who established that empowering leadership significantly enhanced employees' psychological safety or related variables. The divergence between the present findings and earlier studies may be explained by contextual differences. Specifically, while previous studies were largely conducted in organisational settings where empowerment directly shaped employees' work experiences, psychological safety among teachers in secondary schools may depend on a broader range of organisational factors beyond empowerment alone. Moreover, the high average scores for empowerment and psychological safety indicate

little variance in these variables, and this may have hindered empowerment's capacity to become a significant predictor of psychological safety. Therefore, although there is a positive relationship between empowerment and psychological safety, it was not significant enough to exert a significant impact.

With respect to the finding that fair treatment has a significant influence on psychological safety, it was consistent with the assumptions of Perceived Organisational Support Theory by Eisenberger (1986), that employees develop positive psychological outcomes when they perceive equitable treatment. This was also in agreement with various scholars (e.g. Arnold, 2017; Azila-Gbettor et al., 2024; Mohamed et al., 2025; Salas-Vallina et al., 2020) who linked employee perceived fair treatment to positive psychological outcomes among employees. This consistency suggests that fairness in treatment of employees is fundamental in promoting psychologically safe work environments. Concerning the finding that inspirational leadership had a significant influence on psychological safety, the finding was consistent with the assumptions of the Perceived Organizational Support Theory, and previous studies (Arnold, 2017; Azila-Gbettor et al., 2024; Mohamed et al., 2025; Salas-Vallina et al., 2020), which reported that inspirational leadership positively influenced employee psychological well-being, workplace happiness, positive mood, and workers' well-being, all of which are closely associated with psychological safety. The consistency of the present findings with prior studies suggests that inspirational leadership is essential in promoting psychologically safe work environments.

Furthermore, regarding recognition and psychological safety, it was consistent with the assumptions of the Perceived Organizational Support Theory, and previous studies (Jo & Shin, 2025; Alahiane et al., 2023; Gerçek et al., 2026; Larkova, 2025; Merino & Privado, 2015; Weziak-Bialowolska & Bialowolski, 2022), which reported that employee recognition positively influenced mental health, psychological functioning, quality of life, mental well-being, and psychological safety among employees. The consistency between the present findings and prior studies suggests that recognition is a critical leadership practice for enhancing psychologically safe work environments across different organisational and cultural context.

Conclusions

First, the study concluded that empowerment does not fundamentally influence teachers' psychological safety. Although empowerment practices such as encouraging teamwork, supporting professional development, paying attention to workgroup efforts, and involving teachers in problem-solving are important leadership behaviours, they may not independently create psychologically safe work environments for teachers. This suggests that empowerment alone is insufficient in enhancing teachers' feelings of safety. However, fair treatment plays a significant role in enhancing teachers' psychological safety. This is when school leaders communicate important information in a timely manner, treat teachers equally, avoid improper remarks, and maintain positive interactions. Also, inspirational leadership promotes psychological safety among teachers. When leaders provide hope for a better future, demonstrate commitment to school goals, and inspire teachers through positive energy, they make their followers feel psychologically safe. Lastly, recognition is necessary to enhancing psychological safety. When teachers are recognised, they are more likely to feel safe.

This is when leaders recognise their uniqueness, show awareness of their hard work and commitment, and compliment them on how they are persistent about their work.

Recommendations

The study recommends that head teachers should strengthen empowerment-oriented leadership practices. This should be by involving teachers in decision-making, promoting collaborative problem-solving, supporting professional development, and granting teachers greater autonomy and responsibility. Head teachers should also ensure fair treatment of teachers. This should be ensured through timely communication of school information, avoiding favouritism and disrespectful remarks, and maintaining respectful daily interactions. In addition, head teachers should deliberately adopt inspirational leadership. This should be done through articulating a clear school vision, demonstrating commitment to institutional goals, and motivating teachers through consistent encouragement and positive engagement. Furthermore, schools should institutionalise teacher recognition systems. Through these systems, there should be regular acknowledging of teachers' efforts through verbal appreciation, providing constructive feedback, and formal recognition of performance and dedication.

Practical Contribution of the Study

The study provides practical insights for school administrators and education policymakers on leadership practices that can improve overall school environment, strengthening teachers' psychological safety. First, from this study, it is evident that the extent to which the psychological safety of teachers can be improved is highly attributed to their supportive leadership styles, with recognition being a major factor that contributes to teachers' psychological safety. As such, head teachers who regularly recognise the efforts, dedication, and contribution of teachers in their respective institutions are likely to create a safe environment among teachers. Apart from recognition, fair treatment and inspirational leadership were significant predictors of psychological safety, showing that proper interpersonal relations, equal treatment, prompt communication, motivation, and institutional vision were important factors in enhancing teachers' psychological safety. Even though the concept of empowerment was not significantly associated with psychological safety, its positive relationship with psychological safety shows that empowering teachers will also contribute to a psychologically safe environment for teachers.

Limitations

This study makes an important contribution to understanding how supportive leadership influences teachers' psychological safety. However, several limitations should be noted. First, some findings were inconsistent with hypotheses and prior studies, particularly the effect of empowerment, indicating the need for further testing of these relationships across different contexts. Second, the use of self-reported questionnaire data may have introduced common method bias and social desirability effects. Also, although the measurement model showed acceptable validity and reliability, the deletion of several items due to low factor loadings suggests that some construct dimensions may not have been fully captured. Furthermore, the study was also limited to one district in a rural setting, which restricts generalisability to semi-urban and urban school contexts. Besides, since the study adopted the positivist quantitative approach, it

limited deeper exploration of teachers' experiences of psychological safety. Future studies should therefore re-test the inconsistent relationships, expand to diverse settings, and adopt mixed-method approaches for richer insights.

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