

RESEARCH BRIEF 2

# PLD and school-wide wellbeing as predictors of teacher morale and workload

Findings from NZCER's National Survey of Secondary Schools

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2022





# Background

The National Survey of Schools project is part of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research's (NZCER's) Te Pae Tawhiti programme of research. NZCER has run a national survey of secondary schools every 3 years since 2003, with the latest surveys completed online between August and December 2021.

This document is part of the National Survey's research brief series, where we present findings that are useful for policymakers and school leaders. A complete report including all teacher responses to the latest 2021 national survey can be accessed [here](#).<sup>1</sup>

Research Brief 2 explores interactions between school-level factors (school-wide plans to manage social behaviours and schools' professional learning and development [PLD] cultures), class-level factors (teachers' classroom strategies and practices), and teacher-level factors (teachers' morale and workload views).

## KEY MESSAGES

- **Our analysis highlights the enabling role of two school-level variables (school-wide plans to manage social behaviours, and culture of ongoing PLD) in shaping teachers' classroom practices and work experiences.**
- **A strong culture of ongoing PLD is positively associated with good-practice classroom strategies and practices, and is associated with teachers reporting more positive experiences of their work (higher level of morale and more manageable workload).**
- **Having good school-wide plans to manage social behaviours is positively related to a strong culture of ongoing PLD, and more positive levels of morale.**
- **The findings in this brief are relevant in terms of responding to the current changing school environments and the increasing concerns about teacher burnout and workload.**


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## Suggested citation for this research brief

Alansari, M., Li, M., & Boyd, S. (2022). *PLD and school-wide wellbeing as predictors of teacher morale and workload: Findings from NZCER's National Survey of Secondary Schools (Research Brief 2)*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/Teacher perspectives 2021-national-survey-secondary-schools](https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/Teacher%20perspectives%202021-national-survey-secondary-schools)



## 1.1 School-wide plans to manage social behaviours

Providing a caring, safe, and respectful school environment has long been known to be a priority in New Zealand education (Boyd & Barwick, 2011). Evidence has shown that effective behaviour management could be best addressed through a consistent and multifaceted whole-school approach (Boyd & Barwick, 2011), accompanied by teachers' positive strategies, preventative classroom interventions, and clear behavioural expectations (Savage et al., 2011). In addition, as shown in the PB4L School-Wide evaluation, teacher fairness, positive behaviour management systems, and opportunities for students to contribute are also crucial for students' development (Boyd et al., 2015).

Having a school-wide approach works as a foundation for teachers to develop a shared understanding of issues related to student wellbeing (e.g., bullying behaviours) and create a whole-school culture that supports responsibility for behaviour (Savage et al., 2011). Establishing school-wide plans to manage social behaviours enables teachers to communicate school-wide expectations for positive behaviour as well as act in consistent ways without causing additional stress or disruptions to their work.

## 1.2 Importance of PLD

The importance of ongoing PLD in schools has been widely highlighted in research because it provides opportunities for collaborative participation, ensures coherence with local contexts, and leads to changes in teachers' classroom practices (Fischer et al., 2018). PLD can assist teachers to develop key concepts about student behaviours, shift long-held beliefs about student behaviour and teaching and learning, and be more adaptive in their practice.

Prior New Zealand research highlighted that participation in effective PLD can increase teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical capability (Clarke et al., 2021), as well as improve middle leaders' beliefs about their practice (Highfield & Robertson, 2015). Additionally, PLD provides opportunities for collaborations among teachers, which supports a togetherness mind-set and promotes collective knowledge that extends beyond isolated experiences in classrooms (Highfield & Robertson, 2015). This is echoed in another New Zealand study (Savage et al., 2011) that found PLD to be one key enabler to school-wide positive behaviour support.

In addition, PLD is perceived as a process of empowerment (Potolea & Toma, 2015), which has been found to be positively related to teachers' morale (Mackenzie, 2007), their teaching efficacy (Shanks & Dowden, 2019), pedagogical beliefs (e.g., beliefs about ability grouping, Fitzgerald et al., 2021), and lifelong learning (Nugroho et al., 2020). These positive outcomes might occur when teachers' PLD needs are met, which could be indirectly related to substantial shifts in teachers' class instruction and learning outcomes. As such, PLD could also contribute to school climate and system effectiveness.

## 1.3 Teacher workload and morale

Teacher morale is described as "how teachers view themselves, their roles and the level at which their needs are met by the organization" (Mboweni & Taole, 2022, p. 30), which plays a critical role in developing a conducive environment for teaching and learning.

A declining level of teacher morale, and increased workload, is evident in the 2021 national surveys of secondary schools compared to previous years (Alansari et al., 2022). Similar trends have been found internationally. Amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers' mental health and wellbeing have been drastically hampered by various factors, such as additional demands at work, a sense of uncertainty, and a lack of resources at work (Kim et al., 2022).

One indicator of this is shown in the 2021 national survey of secondary teachers. The survey found that 14% of teachers were intending to retrain or change to a career outside education in the next 5 years, up from 8% in 2015 (Alansari et al., 2022).

Prior research on the enabling factors of teacher wellbeing reinforces the focus of this brief to explore school- and class-level variables. Particularly, previous findings showed various predictors of teacher morale, including school climate (Syahril & Hadiyanto, 2018) as well as school culture of PLD and empowerment (Gore et al., 2017). Considering the key role of teacher morale and their perceptions of workload in the teaching and learning, as well as their relations with teachers' intention to leave the profession, it is important to explore how to enhance and promote teachers' experiences related to these two factors (Pressley et al., 2022).

## What we wanted to find out

This brief highlights what the national survey can tell us about some of the specific factors that influence teachers' work. We sought to explore the enabling factors, such as ongoing PLD provision and adequate school-wide plans, that could contribute to secondary teachers' classroom strategies and practices to support wellbeing. We also wanted to know if more positive levels of these factors can lead to enhanced views of work (i.e., teachers' morale and how they feel their workload is manageable). We wanted to explore the interactions between these factors, as we found a paucity of research in this area.

For this brief, we posed two research questions:

1. What are the relations between school context factors (school-wide plans to manage social behaviours, and culture of ongoing PLD) and teachers' work beliefs (morale and workload views)?
2. What are the relations between school context factors (school-wide plans to manage social behaviours, and culture of ongoing PLD) and teachers' classroom strategies and practices?

# 3 What we did

For the 2021 National Survey project, we surveyed a sample of 5,376 teachers. To ensure national representation of schools across all deciles, teachers were randomly chosen from a stratified sample of Years 9–13 and Years 7–13 secondary schools. A total of 1,093 teachers completed the surveys by December 2021. The responses give a nationally representative picture in terms of school decile and are broadly representative by school area and region.

## 3.1 Who we asked

We focused on the survey data from the 740 teachers who responded to all key items relevant to this brief in 2021. Most teachers self-identified as New Zealand European Pākehā (79%) and female (64%). Most of them (76%) taught in Years 9–15 secondary schools and were more likely to teach in main urban area (73%).

## 3.2 What we asked

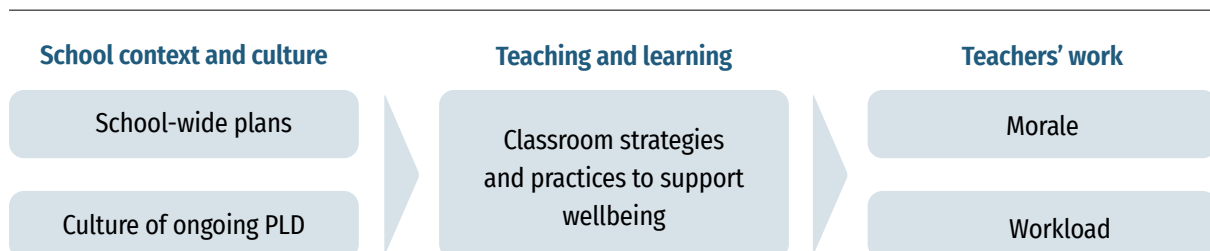
We analysed teacher levels of agreement to survey questions that fall within five main areas:

1. their school culture of ongoing PLD (e.g., “I’ve had good opportunities to see and discuss the work of other teachers in our school”)
2. their school-wide plans to manage social behaviours (e.g., “If I have difficulties with managing student behaviour, I can get good support to decide on next steps”)
3. their classroom strategies and practices to support wellbeing (e.g., “I use group learning or peer support strategies to help students build friendships”)
4. their work morale (e.g., “I enjoy my job”)
5. their perceptions of their workload (e.g., “My workload is manageable”).

## 3.3 How we analysed the data

Figure 1 shows our hypothesised model which presents the possible relations between factors at school level, teaching and learning level, and individual teacher level. We explored whether school context factors and culture (school-wide plans to manage social behaviours; culture of ongoing PLD) would have an influence on teachers’ classroom strategies and practices to support wellbeing and, in turn, on how teachers feel about their work (morale and workload views). Data were analysed quantitatively through descriptive techniques, factor analysis, and structural equation modelling. Our analysis enables exploring whether teachers’ views of their work can be predicted by the school- and class-level factors in the model, but causation cannot be inferred.

FIGURE 1 **Our hypothesised model**



# 4 What we found

## 4.1 More can be done to improve PLD provision

We asked teachers about nine professional learning experiences that are likely to support their growth and effectiveness as teachers. Teachers' positive ratings of the experiences ranged from 29.4% to 68.8%. The most commonly agreed-with statement was that teachers had departmental discussions about teaching practices that enriched their work, shown in Table 1 below. However, only 29.4% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they had received helpful specialist advice outside the school, and 35% that they had found whole-school PLD useful. Teachers' responses indicate various use of PLD and the potential needs for more targeted support and needs-based design.

TABLE 1 **Teacher views of the culture of PLD in the school**

Teacher views of the culture of PLD in the school	% Disagree or Strongly Disagree	% Neutral	% Agree or Strongly Agree
Discussions about teaching practices within my department have enriched my work	13.7%	17.4%	68.8%
I have found my subject association useful	12.7%	27.2%	60.2%
I have been challenged to rethink some of my assumptions about what my students can do	17.5%	23.2%	59.4%
I have been able to easily access a helpful network of teachers who are interested in similar things to me	23.1%	23.9%	53.0%
I've had good opportunities to see and discuss the work of other teachers in our school	28.7%	19.9%	51.5%
School/curriculum leaders provide professional readings that we discuss as a staff/curriculum team	34.7%	20.1%	45.2%
We have good opportunities to explore deeper ideas and theory that underpin new teaching approaches	33.5%	27.2%	39.3%
I have found whole-school PLD useful	39.9%	25.1%	35.0%
I have been able to easily access helpful specialist advice outside the school when I need it	41.9%	28.6%	29.4%

## 4.2 There are associations between school-wide plans to manage social behaviours, ongoing culture of PLD, and how teachers view their practices

We found statistically significant associations between all factors (except for the one between teacher workload and classroom strategies and practices). Table 2 shows the correlations between different factors. Specifically, school-wide plans and culture of ongoing PLD were positively associated, and both predicted good morale. The associations between teacher morale with school-wide plans ( $r = .56$ ) and culture of ongoing PLD ( $r = .55$ ) were the strongest.

TABLE 2 Correlations between different factors

	School-wide plans	Culture of ongoing PLD	Classroom strategies and practices	Morale	Workload
School-wide plans	1				
Culture of ongoing PLD	.51*	1			
Classroom strategies and practices	.15*	.29*	1		
Morale	.56*	.55*	.21*	1	
Workload	.21*	.27*	.03	.49*	1

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

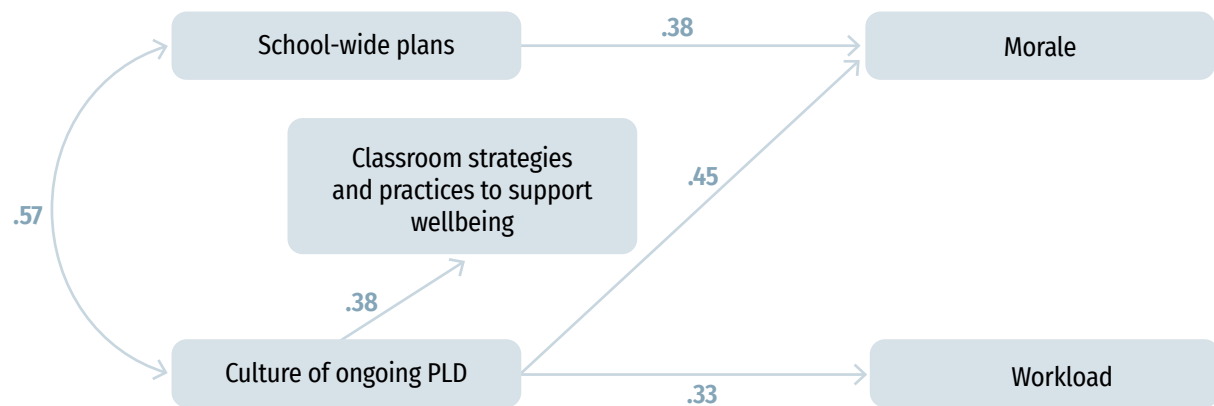
## 4.3 School contextual factors and culture matter

Our analysis shows the interrelations between school contextual factors, classroom strategies, and how teachers view their work.

- Having school-wide plans to manage social behaviours was positively associated with having a school culture of ongoing PLD, and both were associated with good morale.
- An ongoing culture of PLD predicted more use of classroom strategies and practices to support wellbeing, as well as more positive experiences of teachers' work (higher level of morale and more manageable workload). In other words, to teachers in this study, PLD could possibly act as a mechanism through which they support each other and share strategies to deal with difficult or challenging teaching and learning situations.
- Using more classroom strategies and practices to support wellbeing did not predict better views of teachers' work (morale and manageable workload). This may be because the effects of those strategies are experienced by students and not teachers.

Additionally, we found that teachers in higher decile schools responded more positively about their schools' plans to manage social behaviours, culture of ongoing PLD, and classroom strategies. However, there were no significant associations between decile, morale, and workload. Also, no relationships were found between school roll and size of largest class in this model.

FIGURE 2 **Our model showing statistically significant paths**  
(.1 = weak, .3 = moderate, .5 = strong)



## Key messages and implications

This brief highlights the enabling role of two school-level variables (school-wide plans and culture of ongoing PLD) in both class-level instruction and individual-level experiences. Our findings support the crucial role that school-level factors play in shaping teachers' classroom practices and work experiences.

Interestingly, teachers' morale and workload views were related to how they viewed their school contexts but not their classroom practices. This finding might suggest that teacher wellbeing could be better enhanced through consistent school-wide approaches and empowerment rather than through individual or isolated changes to teachers' practice.

This brief reiterates the importance of ongoing investment in improving school-wide plans and ongoing PLD opportunities. In particular, there is value in ongoing research on the types or features of PLD that most benefit teachers, which could positively influence how they feel about their work. In addition, it is important to involve teachers in the design and implementation of school-wide plans, as the alignment between organisational goals with individual needs is crucial for teacher morale (Krishnamoorthi, 2012).



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