

The Effect of University Teachers' Perceived Inclusive Leadership on their Job Performance: The Serial Mediation Effect of Perceived School Support and Teachers' Psychological Empowerment

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Received: April 26, 2023

Accepted: June 1, 2023

Online Published: June 8, 2023

doi:10.5539/hes.v13n3p18

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v13n3p18>

Abstract

Our study explored the effect of perceived inclusive leadership on job performance of university teachers and the serial mediation effect of perceived school support and psychological empowerment among those teachers. Using the questionnaire method, data were collected from a valid sample of 895 university teachers in China. The findings indicated that perceived inclusive leadership significantly and positively affects university teachers' job performance. Among university teachers, both perceived school support and psychological empowerment have a partial mediation effect on the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance. Perceived school support and psychological empowerment have a serial mediation effect between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance. This study provides theoretical and empirical evidence for research related to job performance of university teachers.

Keywords: inclusive leadership, perceived school support, teachers' psychological empowerment, teachers' job performance, university teachers

1. Introduction

Improvement in higher education quality is largely influenced by university teachers' job performance and is university leaders' chief concern (Noor, 2021; Shi, Meng, & Huang, 2022). Enhancing the job performance of university teachers is crucial not only for themselves but also for the sustainability of higher education institutions (Mulà et al., 2017). Therefore, improving their job performance is central to the survival and development of universities. Some empirical studies have further suggested that efforts made to improve the job performance of university teachers have significantly affected universities' potential for development and comprehensive strength (Zada et al., 2022).

Job performance combines employees' behaviors and outcomes that are closely related to strategic organizational goals (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) suggested that improving inclusive leadership is beneficial in promoting employees' performance and allowing universities to gain an advantage for their survival and competition. Regarding educational research, job performance of teachers represents their direct contribution to their school's performance, their support for their schools and social and psychological environment, and the extent to which they adapt to workplace changes (Bhat & Beri, 2016). Some scholars have analyzed factors influencing job performance of teachers from different perspectives, believing that if schools want to adapt to economic, social, and cultural developments, they need to embrace inclusive leadership for improving their job performance (Castillo-Acobo et al., 2022; Crisol Moya, Molonia, & Caurcel Cara, 2020). University teachers, who are representatives of intellectual employees, have great creativity and autonomy in terms of teaching and research (Zhang & Huang, 2009). Because university teachers are more concerned about being respected and having a sense of self-worth and have a higher demand for an open and inclusive management style, inclusive leadership is more in line with their needs, and, consequently, more critical for higher education institutions (Parveen, Uzair-ul-Hassan, & Aimen, 2021; Stefani & Blessinger, 2017). Furthermore, perceived inclusive leadership in teachers is strongly associated with some crucial antecedent variables (e.g., perceived school support and teachers' psychological empowerment) that influence their job

performance (Bogler & Nir, 2012; Shi et al., 2022).

In reality, university leaders encounter many difficulties in improving job performance of teachers (Yusoff, Khan, & Azam, 2013). For example, when school support is low, teachers often become reluctant to devote time and energy to their work (Asgari, Mezginejad, & Taherpour, 2020). If university teachers feel more empowered psychologically, they can better control their work (Saleem, Nisar, & Imran, 2017). Therefore, to offer a rationale for effectively enhancing the job performance of university teachers, the relevant factors must be further explored. Education-related research has also confirmed that inclusive leadership positively affects job performance of university teachers (Aboramadan, Dahleez, & Farao, 2022; Al-Atwi & Al-Hassani, 2021). However, few studies have simultaneously explored the relationship between inclusive leadership, perceived school support, teachers' psychological empowerment, and teachers' job performance. Therefore, we examined the relationship between university teachers' perceived inclusive leadership and their job performance and the mediation effect of perceived school support and teachers' psychological empowerment on the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance so as to provide a theoretical and practical rationale for the management of university leaders.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Inclusive Leadership and Teachers' Job Performance*

Inclusive leadership refers to the ability of leaders to listen and attend to the needs of their followers and show openness, availability, and accessibility when interacting with them (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010). Some researchers have pointed out that inclusive leadership is a specific leadership style that accentuates the importance of respecting subordinates and meeting their diverse needs (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Some studies have shown that inclusive leadership can offer a favorable environment for supporting the job performance of subordinates (Chen, Li, & Leung, 2016; Qurrahtulain, Bashir, Hussain, Ahmed, & Nisar, 2022). In educational research, Rayner (2009) defined inclusive leadership as a leadership style that school leaders use to create a harmonious and inclusive atmosphere for teachers, provide teachers the help they need, respect what they have said, take their advice, support what they have said and done, and appreciate their contributions. Inclusive leadership is effective in promoting the quality of teaching (Crisol Moya et al., 2020). However, when teachers cannot perceive that their leaders care about, appreciate, and approve of themselves, they tend to not give a positive response to their leaders, which hinders their job performance (Castillo-Acobo et al., 2022). An empirical study found that inclusive leadership positively and significantly affects teachers' job performance, and a high inclusive leadership level is effective in improving the job performance (Al-Atwi & Al-Hassani, 2021). Furthermore, if university leaders create an inclusive atmosphere for teachers, the teachers will focus more on their work, which, consequently, improves their job performance (Aboramadan et al., 2022). Based on the aforementioned discussion, we propose Hypothesis 1: university teachers' perception of inclusive leadership has a significant and positive effect on their job performance.

2.2 *The Mediation Effect of Perceived School Support on the Relationship between Inclusive Leadership and Teachers' Job Performance*

Perceived organizational support is the support that subordinates feel they get from the organization, including a sense of fairness, leadership support, organizational rewards, and good working conditions (Ling & Yang, 2006). Several studies have confirmed that inclusive leadership significantly and positively affects perceived organizational support (Aslan, 2019; Nasution & Syahrizal, 2021). The concept of perceived school support is derived from that of perceived organizational support, which defines organizations as schools (Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli, & Lynch, 1997; Hu & Liu, 2019). Perceived school support refers to overall beliefs among teachers about the extent to which schools value their contributions and care about their well-being (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). Some educational studies have suggested that leadership is effective in increasing the perceived school support level among university teachers (Asgari et al., 2020; Bernarto et al., 2020). School leaders can enhance teachers' perceptions of school support by motivating and recognizing them, advocating innovation, and tolerating the teachers' effort to have a try (Aboramadan et al., 2022; Billingsley & Banks, 2018). Furthermore, perceived school support is a powerful tool for explaining the relationship between schools and teachers. The greater the teachers' perceived school support, the more willing they are to repay their school and the more likely they are to improve their job performance (Chang, Liu, Hsieh, & Chen, 2020; Masyhuri, Pardiman, & Siswanto, 2021). According to previous studies, perceived school support mediates the relationship between school leadership and the job performance of university teachers to some extent (Asgari et al., 2020; Zada et al., 2022). Therefore, we propose Hypothesis 2: perceived school support has a mediation effect on the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance among university

teachers.

2.3 The Mediation Effect of Teachers' Psychological Empowerment on the Relationship between Inclusive Leadership and Their Job Performance

Psychological empowerment is a composite of psychological states or subjective perceptions of individuals, which reflects an intrinsic motivation to perform the job (Spreitzer, 1995). Psychological empowerment can serve as a medium connecting organizational context and subordinates' behavior (Wang & Liu, 2014). In educational research, psychological empowerment of teachers refers to the psychological state in which teachers believe they have a certain level of influence and autonomous control at work (Dee, Henkin, & Duemer, 2003). Educational researchers have focused on the association between inclusive leadership and psychological empowerment. For example, previous empirical research has confirmed that if school leaders provide teachers the timely help and guidance they need, teachers tend to believe that their work is recognized, which then improves their psychological empowerment (Gil, Rodrigo-Moya, & Morcillo-Bellido, 2018). If school leaders provide teachers with psychological empowerment in an inclusive style, teachers will experience less emotional dissonance at work (Nair & Sivakumar, 2020). If teachers receive psychological empowerment from their schools that meet their needs for development, their performance will improve (Saleem et al., 2017; Shi et al., 2022; Yao, Xiang, & Shen, 2022). Gil et al. (2018) further suggested that if school leaders encourage teachers to participate in decision-making to increase the level of their psychological empowerment perception, teachers' performance on research will improve. Furthermore, some related empirical studies have clearly revealed that teachers' psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between their perceived school leadership and work attitudes (Boonyarit, Chomphupart, & Arin, 2010). Therefore, if teachers are given autonomy and trust and their needs for development are met in the process of perceived inclusive leadership, their job performance will improve. Accordingly, we propose Hypothesis 3: psychological empowerment has a mediation effect on the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance among university teachers.

2.4 The Serial Mediation Effect of Perceived School Support and Teachers' Psychological Empowerment

According to the principle of reciprocity, employees having a sense of organizational support are more likely to facilitate social exchange among organizational members, thereby enhancing their psychological empowerment (Fesler & Crozier, 1964). Employees' perceived organizational support significantly and positively affects their psychological empowerment (Maan, Abid, Butt, Ashfaq, & Ahmed, 2020; Naktiyok, 2019). Studies on education have also confirmed the relationship between teachers' perceived school support and their psychological empowerment. For example, Bogler and Nir (2012) confirmed that teachers having higher perceived school support levels show higher psychological empowerment levels. Other studies have found that perceived school support among university teachers significantly and positively affects their psychological empowerment (Abdulrab et al., 2018; Iqbal & Hashmi, 2015). According to the aforementioned discussion, we believe that with a higher perceived school support level, as university teachers may have a higher psychological empowerment level.

Inclusive leaders voluntarily provide support and assistance to teachers at work, which helps the teachers to enhance their perceptions of school leader support (Aboramadan et al., 2022; Crisol Moya et al., 2020). In addition, inclusive leaders encourage teachers to express their opinions and views and wholeheartedly approve of their work, thereby increasing their psychological empowerment level (Blase & Blase, 2001). Support from school leaders indicates that the school values the opinions of teachers and encourages them to participate in decision-making. Because teachers feel their importance and influence in the school, they will have a higher psychological empowerment level (Warda, 2020). According to social exchange theory, when subordinates receive higher levels of inclusion, permission, and support from their leaders and organizations, they tend to engage more in their work in return, which is consistent with the principle of reciprocity (Blau, 2017; Gouldner, 1960). Empirical studies have found that both perceived school support and psychological empowerment significantly and positively affect the job performance of university teachers (Mir & Mir, 2015). Teachers who can perceive school support are more psychologically empowered, which effectively enhances their job performance (Zada et al., 2022). Higher levels of perceived inclusive leadership among university teachers will facilitate the generation of perceived school support, facilitate the accumulation of psychological empowerment, and, consequently, enhance their job performance. Therefore, we propose Hypothesis 4: perceived school support and psychological empowerment have a serial mediation effect on the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance among university teachers.

Accordingly, we explored the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance among university teachers. Using perceived school support and teachers' psychological empowerment as mediating

variables, we established a research framework (Figure 1). Therefore, we believe that the consequence variables of perceived inclusive leadership among university teachers must be further explored. Our study has deepened the understanding of the influence mechanisms of the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance among university teachers.

3. Method

3.1 Research Framework

Based on the aforementioned hypotheses, we propose a research framework, as shown in Figure 1.

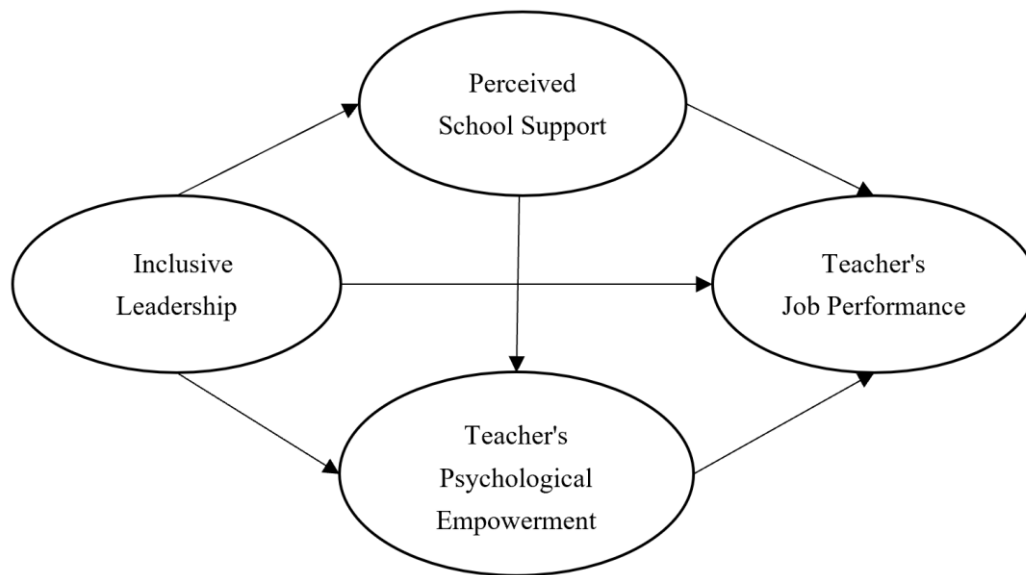


Figure 1. Research Framework

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

Through convenience sampling, we surveyed teachers in five universities in Hebei Province, China. The selected universities are all excellent exemplary institutions actively introducing the reform in performance management of university teachers. Teachers in these universities usually have high job performance. In addition, before the questionnaire was administered, we informed the participants of the survey's purpose and that they could return the questionnaire anonymously. We also told them that their data would be kept confidential and that they could refuse or withdraw from the survey at any time. After the participants provided their informed consent, the questionnaire was distributed on the website "web-based questionnaire (www.wjx.cn)". The participants could fill in the questionnaires by scanning the 2-dimensional bar code containing the link to the questionnaire or clicking on the link. The survey consisted of a pilot and a formal test. In the pretest, 225 questionnaires were distributed. After 24 invalid questionnaires were excluded, we received 201 valid questionnaires, and the effective recovery rate was 89.3%. In the formal test, participants who had taken the pretest were excluded, and therefore, the questionnaire was administered to 1076 teachers. After 181 invalid questionnaires were excluded, we received 895 valid questionnaires, and the effective recovery rate was 83.2%. The formal test included 324 (36.2%) male teachers and 571 (63.8%) female teachers. In terms of teaching years, 141 (15.8%) teachers had taught for ≤ 5 years, 184 (20.6%) had taught for 6–10 years, 189 (21.1%) for 11–15 years, 150 (16.8%) for 16–20 years, and 231 (25.8%) for ≥ 21 years.

3.3 Statistical Analysis Method

SPSS and AMOS were used to analyze the data collected in this survey. For the pretest sample, we performed the item analysis and exploratory factor analysis. In the item analysis, the correlation between each item and the total score was $> .400$. The first 27% and the last 27% of the total score were selected as the high-score and low-score groups, respectively. T-tests for independent samples were conducted for each item, and the critical ratio value was > 3 . All p values were $< .050$. The Cronbach's alpha value did not increase after each item was deleted, which revealed that the scale had a great discriminating power (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). In the exploratory factor analysis, factor loading was $> .400$ and the cumulative explained variance in total was $> 50\%$, which indicated good validity (Guadagnoli & Velicer, 1988).

For the formal test sample, we first conducted a reliability analysis and confirmatory factor analysis to determine the reliability and validity of the scale. The Cronbach's alpha value of the scale was $>.700$, indicating good reliability (Nunnally, 1978). In this study, several indicators were used to analyze the degree of model fit, including CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR. Data were considered to be well-fitted if CFI and TLI were $>.900$, and RMSEA and SRMR were $<.080$ (Byrne, 2001). Then, Harman's one-factor test was used to test the severity of the common method bias. Further, basic descriptive statistics analysis (mean and standard deviation) and correlation analysis were performed. Finally, structural equation modeling and bootstrapping (5000 samples) were used to test the mediation effect.

3.4 Measures

3.4.1 Inclusive Leadership

We used the Inclusive Leadership Scale developed by Carmeli et al. (2010) after slight modifications. The scale consists of three dimensions, namely openness, availability, and accessibility, and nine items. It was originally designed to examine corporate employees. We here slightly modified the items to fit the educational context, replacing the word "leader" with "dean of a secondary college" and "organization" with "school." To confirm whether university teachers truly perceive the inclusive leadership demonstrated by a secondary college dean, we, according to the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 1995), used a 5-point Likert scale, in which 1 represents "strongly disagree," 2 "relatively disagree," 3 "unsure," 4 "relatively agree," and 5 "strongly agree." This was modified into a new version, in which 0 means "never," 1 "rarely," 2 "occasionally," 3 "often," and 4 "always." For inclusive leadership of a secondary college dean perceived by university teachers, the higher the scores, the higher the perceived inclusive leadership level. For the pretest sample, the item analysis results revealed that the scale met the criteria for item retention and did not require the removal of items. The exploratory factor analysis demonstrated that the loading for the three factors ranged from .851 to .931, and the cumulative explained variance in total was 81.704%, which indicated good validity. The Cronbach's alpha value of the scale in the formal test sample was .886, which indicated good reliability. The confirmatory factor analysis revealed the following: CFI = .992, TLI = .987, RMSEA = .041, and SRMR = .020. These results indicate a good fit of the data.

3.4.2 Perceived School Support

We used the Perceived Organizational Support Scale developed by Ling and Yang (2006) after slight modifications. This scale includes three dimensions, namely job support, employee value identity, and caring about interests, with a total of 24 question items. The scale was originally designed to examine corporate employees. We here slightly modified the items to fit the educational context, replacing the word "employee" with "teacher" and "organization" with "school." Four items that did not fit the educational context, such as "if I were laid off, the school would hire me instead of hiring a new person" were removed, leaving 20 items. A 6-point Likert scale was used, with the scores ranging from 1 (schools strongly disapprove of caring about teachers) to 6 (schools strongly approve of caring about teachers). Higher scores indicated higher levels of perceived school support. For the pretest sample, the item analysis results revealed that the scale met the criteria for item retention and did not require the removal of any item. The exploratory factor analysis revealed that the loading for the three factors ranged from .760 to .886, and the cumulative explained variance in total was 73.680%, which indicated good validity. The Cronbach's alpha value of the scale in the formal test sample was .943, which indicated good reliability. The confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that CFI = .976, TLI = .972, RMSEA = .043, and SRMR = .025, which indicated a good fit of the data.

3.4.3 Teachers' Psychological Empowerment

We used the Psychological Empowerment Scale developed by Spreitzer (1995). This scale includes four dimensions, namely meaning, self-determination, competence, and impact, with a total of 12 question items. The scale was originally designed to evaluate corporate managers. We slightly modified the items of this scale to fit the educational context, replacing the word "department" with "faculty." A 5-point Likert scale was used, with the scores ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated higher levels of teachers' psychological empowerment. For the pretest sample, the item analysis indicated that the scale met the criteria for item retention and did not require the removal of items. The exploratory factor analysis demonstrated that the loading for the four factors ranged from .828 to .900, and the cumulative explained variance in total was 82.761%, which indicated good validity. For the formal test sample, the Cronbach's alpha value of the scale was .895, which indicated good reliability. The confirmatory factor analysis revealed that CFI = .998, TLI = .997, RMSEA = .016, and SRMR = .015, indicating a good fit of the data.

3.4.4 Teachers' Job Performance

We used the scale of teachers' perceived job performance developed by Bhat and Beri (2016). This scale includes three dimensions, namely task performance, contextual performance, and adaptive performance, with 43 question items. A 5-point Likert scale was used, and the scores ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (often). Higher scores indicated higher levels of teachers' perceived job performance. For the pretest sample, the item analysis results indicated that the correlation coefficient of three items in the scale and the one in the total scale were not greater than .4. Because the aforementioned three items, namely "I believe it is not necessary to maintain interpersonal relationships with others at work," "I feel lack of communication during working hours," and "I feel irritated due to language accent of my colleagues," met the criteria for deleting items, we deleted them, which led to an increase in the Cronbach's alpha value. The exploratory factor analysis revealed that the loading for the three factors ranged from .465 to .834, and the cumulative explained variance in total was 50.358%, which indicated good validity of the remaining 40 question items in the scale. For the formal test sample, the Cronbach's alpha value of the scale was .964, which indicated good reliability. The confirmatory factor analysis revealed that CFI = .950, TLI = .947, RMSEA = .042, and SRMR = .035, indicating a good fit of the data.

4. Results

4.1 Common Method Variance Test

Harman's one-factor test was used to test the common method bias. The results revealed that KMO = 0.972, which met the criterion of $>.800$, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < .001$). Before Promax rotation, we obtained 13 factors whose eigenvalues were >1 , and the explained variance of the first factor was 33.252%, which is $<50\%$ of the reference value (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). This indicated that no serious problem of common method bias was presented in this study.

4.2 Variable Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was used to observe the correlation between variables. The correlation coefficients ranged from .144 to .623, all of which reached a significant level of $p < .001$. Significant and positive correlations existed among the variables, and all correlation coefficients did not exceed .800. This indicated that serious collinearity was lacking and that the requirements for a hypothesis test of structural equation modeling were met (Benesty, Chen, Huang, & Cohen, 2009). Moreover, the square root of the AVE of each dimension was greater than the correlation coefficient of each variable in more than 75% of the cases, which meets the criteria for assessing discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Therefore, this study has good discriminant validity. For more details, please refer to Table 1.

Table 1. Description statistics and correlation analysis

variables Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	.798												
2	.524	.816											
3	.470	.494	.885										
4	.429	.339	.194	.781									
5	.401	.333	.197	.552	.806								
6	.397	.313	.144	.623	.564	.743							
7	.349	.270	.186	.297	.327	.292	.767						
8	.346	.278	.191	.288	.308	.279	.512	.809					
9	.355	.260	.221	.304	.324	.306	.515	.430	.799				
10	.370	.280	.187	.416	.413	.420	.488	.437	.541	.812			
11	.513	.423	.337	.511	.478	.488	.449	.429	.443	.399	.806		
12	.472	.401	.351	.473	.464	.481	.427	.413	.407	.464	.560	.757	
13	.477	.382	.287	.439	.465	.435	.479	.445	.481	.524	.614	.523	.723
M	3.658	3.744	3.711	4.006	4.067	3.940	3.767	3.618	3.815	3.060	3.103	2.894	3.127
SD	1.114	1.085	1.152	1.133	1.230	1.112	1.016	1.074	1.030	1.161	1.066	1.047	.980

Note. 1 = openness; 2 = availability; 3 = accessibility; 4 = job support; 5 = value identity; 6 = interest concern; 7 = meaning; 8 = self-determination; 9 = competence; 10 = impact; 11 = task performance; 12 = contextual performance; 13 = adaptive performance. In the table, the correlation coefficients are all shows a level of significance of $***p < .001$. Bold figures in the diagonal line are the square roots of AVE.

4.3 Structural Equation Modeling

First, after constructing a model to analyze the direct effect of perceived inclusive leadership on the job performance of university teachers, we found that the model fitted well: CFI = .986, TLI = .973, RMSEA = .061,

and SRMR = .028. Because inclusive leadership significantly and positively affected their job performance ($\beta = .779, p < .001$) and explained 60.7% of teachers' job performance ($SMC = .607$), H1 was confirmed.

Second, using perceived school support and psychological empowerment among teachers as mediating variables, we constructed a serial mediation model (Figure 2 and Table 2). The model had good fit indices: CFI = .970, TLI = .960, RMSEA = .053, and SRMR = .037. Specifically, perceived school support exhibited a partial mediation effect on the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance among university teachers ($\beta = .212, p < .001$), and thus, H2 was verified. Teachers' psychological empowerment has a partial mediation effect on the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance of university teachers ($\beta = .147, p < .001$), and thus, H3 was verified. Perceived school support and psychological empowerment have a serial mediation effect on the impact of perceived inclusive leadership on job performance among university teachers ($\beta = .115, p < .001$), and thus, H4 was verified.

Table 2. Mediation Effect with Bootstrapping

Path	Estimate	Std. Error	95% LLCI	95% ULCI
Direct effects	.309	.039	.237	.381
Total Indirect effects	.474	.032	.414	.541
Indirect effect 1	.212	.030	.155	.273
Indirect effect 2	.147	.025	.103	.203
Indirect effect 3	.115	.022	.080	.167
Total effects	.783	.036	.712	.852

Note. *** $p < .001$. Bootstrapping random sampling 5000 times; LLCI = lower limit of confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit of confidence interval; Direct effects = university teachers' perceived inclusive leadership → their job performance; Indirect effect 1 = university teachers' perceived inclusive leadership → their perceived school support → their job performance; Indirect effect 2 = university teachers' perceived inclusive leadership → their psychological empowerment → their job performance; Indirect effect 3 = university teachers' perceived inclusive leadership → their psychological empowerment → their job performance; Total effects = direct effects + total indirect effects.

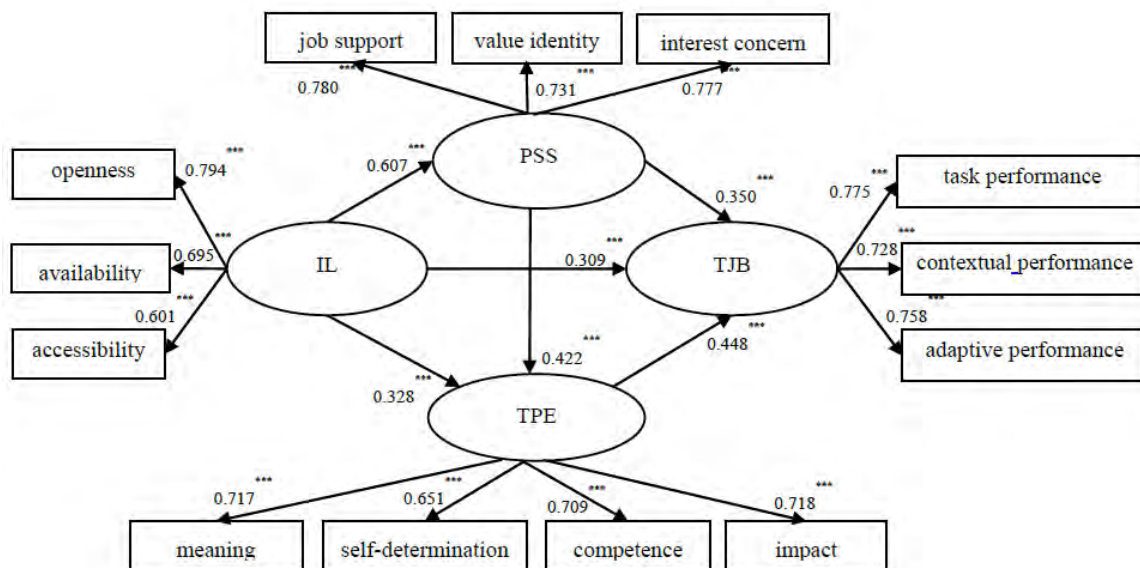


Figure 2. The serial mediation model

Note. *** $p < .001$; IL = Inclusive Leadership; PSS = Perceived School Support; TPE = Teachers' Psychological Empowerment; TJB = Teachers' Job Performance.

Subsequently, according to suggestions by Nevitt and Hancock (2001), we used bootstrapping to further examine the effect of the serial mediation model that perceived inclusive leadership has on the job performance of teachers. The total mediating effect value was .474 and the total indirect effect consisted of three effects: indirect effect path 1: university teachers' perceived inclusive leadership → their perceived school support → their job

performance (effect value = .212, LLCI = .155, ULCI = .273); indirect effect path 2: university teachers' perceived inclusive leadership → their psychological empowerment → their job performance (effect value = .147, LLCI = .103, ULCI = .203); indirect effect path 3: university teachers' perceived inclusive leadership → their perceived school support → their psychological empowerment → their job performance (effect value = .115, LLCI = .080, ULCI = .167). All 95% confidence intervals for the aforementioned indirect effects did not contain 0, which indicated that the three indirect effects attained significance. In addition, perceived inclusive leadership significantly and positively affected job performance among university teachers (direct effect = .309, LLCI = .237, ULCI = .381), and the 95% confidence interval for this direct effect did not contain 0, which indicated that the direct effect attained significance. Perceived school support strengthens the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance among university teachers through their psychological empowerment (Table 2 and Figure 2).

5. Discussion

Based on the social exchange theory and by introducing perceived school support and teacher psychological empowerment, we explored the influence mechanism of perceived inclusive leadership on job performance among university teachers. In addition, we explored the mediation effect of perceived school support and psychological empowerment on the path that perceived inclusive leadership affects job performance among university teachers. The study results have confirmed these hypotheses. This study expanded the exploration of university teachers' perceived inclusive leadership and their job performance. The findings can help researchers better understand the mechanisms influencing the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performances, and, consequently, is of theoretical value.

First, the study results showed that university teachers' perceived inclusive leadership significantly and positively affected their job performance. This result is similar to those of previous studies in which an increase in the inclusive leadership level of teachers is associated with an improvement in their work attitudes and behaviors (Aboramadan et al., 2022; Al-Atwi & Al-Hassani, 2021). School leaders with inclusive leadership can help create a more stimulating and friendly work environment for teachers (Rayner, 2009). The literature on higher education suggests that when university teachers believe that school leaders exhibit greater inclusiveness and openness to their new ideas and technologies, they think that the leaders value and care more about them, which significantly improves their job performance (Noor, 2021).

Second, the study results revealed that university teachers' perceived school support partially mediates the relationship between their perceived inclusive leadership and their job performance. The results have indirectly proved past empirical findings that school leadership positively affects teachers' perceived school support (Asgari et al., 2020; Bernarto et al., 2020) and that a high perceived school support level can further improve the job performance of teachers (Asgari et al., 2020; Zada et al., 2022). Support from inclusive leaders makes university teachers feel that their contributions are valued and their well-being is cared for, which enhances their perceptions of school support. Some studies on higher education have also suggested that high levels of perceived school enable university teachers to perceive how the school assists and cares for them in their work, which then improves their job performance (Chang et al., 2020).

Moreover, the study results revealed that psychological empowerment among teachers partially mediates the relationship between their perceived inclusive leadership and job performance. The positive effect of teachers' psychological empowerment can thus improve their job performance by increasing the level of their perceptions about inclusive leadership. The results have also indirectly proved past empirical findings that inclusive leadership positively influences psychological empowerment among teachers (Gil et al., 2018; Nair & Sivakumar, 2020). Moreover, teachers' psychological empowerment is a crucial factor influencing their job performance (Saleem et al., 2017; Shi et al., 2022; Yao et al., 2022). Inclusive leaders can provide teachers the guidance, encouragement, and praise they need in a timely manner. This would help them perceive psychological empowerment (Blase & Blase, 2001). Furthermore, some studies on higher education have indicated that when university teachers experience empowerment, they will be strongly motivated at work, which would result in improved performance (Warda, 2020).

Finally, the study results demonstrated a serial mediation effect of perceived school support and psychological empowerment on the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance among university teachers. This suggests that the positive effect of university teachers' perceived inclusive leadership influences their perceived school support and contributes to changes in their psychological empowerment, which in turn affects their job performance. According to the social exchange theory, when organizational leaders treat their subordinates in an appropriate and fair manner, their subordinates experience perceived organizational support.

Therefore, their subordinates, based on the principle of reciprocity, will work independently and will repay them by adopting more positive work attitudes and behaviors (Blau, 2017; Eisenberger et al., 1986). When university teachers feel the inclusive leadership shown by their leaders, their perceived school support levels will increase, which will further enable the teachers to feel their control and influence over their work and, consequently, deliver greater job performance.

6. Conclusions

The findings indicate that perceived inclusive leadership of university teachers significantly and positively affects their job performance. Perceived school support exhibits a partial mediation effect on the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance. Psychological empowerment has a partial mediation effect on the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance. Perceived school support and psychological empowerment have a serial mediation effect on the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance.

7. Implications

Based on the aforementioned discussion, we recommend the following for higher educational institutions: first, universities can select leaders with inclusive leadership traits by providing special training in improving inclusive leadership and encourage the university leaders to seek innovative opinions of university teachers in a timely manner by establishing open communication channels. Second, university leaders should fully support teachers, identify difficulties that they encounter in their job or life, encourage and help them in a timely manner, and pay more attention to their interests. Furthermore, the leaders should increase the degree of teachers identifying with the school's values by outlining visions for their school and providing role models. Third, university leaders can improve the perception of psychological empowerment among teachers by encouraging them to actively participate in school affairs and manage themselves as well as by providing promotion opportunities and rewards.

8. Limitation and future research

This study still has some limitations: (1) It only covers the teachers in five universities in Hebei Province, China, who volunteered to participate in the survey, and we may further expand the geographic scope of the sample. (2) This study only discussed perceived school support and psychological empowerment, the mediating variables between inclusive leadership and job performance. It should be determined whether other potential mediators exist in the process, such as organizational commitment (Yao et al., 2022), organizational learning (Afzali, Motahari, & Hatami-Shirkouhi, 2014), and caring ethical climate (Qi & Liu, 2017), as all of them may have a mediation effect on the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance among university teachers. (3) The nature of our cross-sectional data prevented us from drawing causal inferences in this study. Therefore, a longitudinal study may be conducted or a quasi-experimental design may be used to deepen the understanding of the dynamics of changes in the relationships between variables.

Acknowledgments

We thank all study participants. YFL has drafted the manuscript. JH served as the research advisor. JH and YFL made important contributions to conception, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript revision. This study received funding from "A Quantitative Study on the Improvement in Job Performance of the Teachers in Hebei University," the Projects in Humanities and Social Science Research Project of Hebei Education Department in 2023 (SQ2023073).

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