Original article

How leaders' empowering behavior influences teacher's positive voice behavior: the mediating role of self-efficacy and burnout

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Abstract:
This study examines the psychological process by which delegative leadership affects subordinates' positive voice behavior in the context of educational management. The theoretical model proposes that teachers' self-efficacy and burnout mediate the relationship between school managers' empowering behavior and teachers' positive voice behavior. A study of 351 primary school teachers in Shenzhen, China, found that teachers' self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between school managers' empowering behavior and its effects on teachers. This study elucidates the psychological process through which delegative leadership influences teachers' positive voice behavior and provides practical suggestions for school leaders/managers to deepen their understanding of how to help employees express their opinions in organizations.

1. Introduction

In China, seeking to enhance output efficiency becomes a predictable agenda during periods of moderate economic decline. Effective management improvements are a way to increase organizational efficiency. Public primary schools, as government-affiliated institutions in China, inevitably confront this dilemma: How to improve output efficiency while maintaining unchanged inputs becomes a long-standing objective. Generally, effective management improvements emerge from front-line employees who are more familiar with organizational conditions than senior executive managers who set strategic goals and directions. This approach requires employees not only to fully perform their internal occupational roles but also to engage in external roles. Many organizations positively accept and highly praise the practice of soliciting employee input during major organizational restructuring. This approach is nominated as 'speaking up', is seen as a way to elicit successful organizational change (Nikolaou et al., 2007).

However, public school principals and some teachers are appointed by the local or central Education Ministry through an administrative appointment system, and others are contract laborers recruited from the job market. Faced with the demand to improve efficiency, contract teachers may offer more practical suggestions due to their closer connection with society. Although 'speaking up' has become widely accepted and promoted in recent years, encouraging front-line employees to voice their suggestions, many contract teachers still choose to remain silent. They fear their voices may not reach the decision-making agenda and could lead to

undesirable consequences. To provide insights for top leaders on motivating teachers to voice their opinions positively, this study examines the association between leadership and voice behavior, as well as the psychological mechanisms influencing these behaviors in school settings. This understanding will help top-level managers develop action plans to encourage teachers' positive voice behavior.

This study examines the impact of delegative leadership on teachers' positive voice behavior, exploring both direct and indirect effects through positive (self-efficacy) and negative (burnout) aspects of teachers' mentality. By analyzing the relationship between delegative leadership and positive voice behavior, this research addresses a contextual gap in the literature. In addition, it analyzes the varied influences of delegative leadership on teachers' mental states, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of leadership dynamics in educational settings. The research questions listed below will be addressed in this paper:

1) What role does the delegative leadership of school leaders play in teachers' positive voice behavior?
2) What is the impact of teachers' self-efficacy on the relationship between delegative leadership and positive voice behavior?
3) How does teachers' burnout affect the relationship between delegative leadership and positive voice behavior?

2. Ways to stimulate teachers' positive voice behaviors

Under the Chinese educational system, which combines collective and market-oriented approaches, educational management increasingly focuses on grassroots input. This agenda has gained academic attention, with teacher voice behavior being explained by various antecedents. However, there is insufficient research on the positive voice behavior of primary school teachers, particularly from a psychological perspective. "In general, the concept of voice behavior is defined as an opportunity for employees to express their opinions to decision-makers and to respond to job dissatisfaction (Liu et al., 2010). Van Dyne et al. (1995 & 1998) conceptualized voice behavior as a type of extra-role behavior that goes beyond one's role expectations. They described it as a kind of discretionary behavior that is potentially beneficial to others or organizations. This study aligns with the research stream on positive voice behavior, which involves expressing change-oriented thoughts, opinions, and suggestions that aim to bring about positive changes in the work environment. According to Ng and Feldman (2012), voice behavior is defined as communication that aims to bring about positive changes and improvements in a given context, including actions such as alerting leaders to prospective issues and providing management with solutions for cost reduction. Teachers' positive voice behavior is influenced by the perceived consequences of their actions. Positive voice behavior will recur when teachers believe the results of their actions attract management's attention and are beneficial to themselves. Conversely, they will reduce or stop voicing if they perceive their actions as unbeneficial or ignored by management. These changes

in behavior align with Skinner (1971) reinforcement theory, which includes positive and negative reinforcement. School managers who wish to encourage teachers' positive voice behavior must create environments and conditions for positive reinforcement and delegate certain authorities and discretions to teachers. In academia, this motivation for teachers' positive voice behavior is referred to as delegative leadership, a type of leadership that emphasizes low proportions of supportive and instructional behaviors while encouraging subordinates to express insights on management and production improvements (Hersey, Blanchard & Natemeyer, 1979).

Teachers' positive voice behavior is influenced by their cognition, behavior, and environment (Bandura, 1977). Teachers' positive voice behavior increases when they perceive an untethered environment. Additionally, school managers' authorization can highly motivate teachers' positive voice behavior, as it serves as a motivational factor related to the job itself (Herzberg et al., 1959). In contrast, teachers without sufficient authorization may not voice their opinions, believing their voices will not be heard by management. Some teachers may view increased authorization as an added responsibility, leading to stress and a negative mentality, and consequently avoid voicing their opinions.

Employee voice behavior is influenced by structural and psychological empowerment (Raub et al., 2012; Yoo, 2017). As a positive behavior, voice behavior is motivated by self-efficacy; employees with strong self-belief are more likely to express their opinions. Conversely, burnout negatively affects performance and voice behavior (Thomas & Lankau, 2009; Ashtari et al., 2009; Sanchez-Gomez & Breso, 2020). The behaviour of employees expressing their opinions is greatly influenced by their perception of leadership, and the mental processes of employees play a vital part in reducing this influence (Yan, 2018). This study examines the antecedents motivating teachers' positive voice behavior, focusing on psychological mechanisms. There are two clear and opposing paths affecting teachers' positive voice behavior in organizational transformation: a positive path where motivational factors encourage positive voice behavior through managers' empowerment, and a negative path where increased authorization and resulting stress reduce teachers' willingness to voice their opinions.

3. Delegation brings both pressure and motivation

The creators of teaching processes standardize curricula and materials, but teachers implement these in varied and diverse ways. Over-instruction from administration and excessive support from leaders can erode teachers' professionalism and motivation, stifling their creativity. Delegative leadership is not uncommon in school management. Under delegative leadership, teachers gain confidence to conduct their practices with their own professional characteristics. This confidence and psychological performance are defined as self-efficacy in academia (Bandura, 1977). Bandura proposed the self-efficacy theory to explain human behavior, asserting that variations in human behavior can be explained by the combination of a person's behavior and cognition, as well as the interaction

between environment, behavior, and human (Bandura, 1977). Bandura (1986) further suggested that various elements can enhance an individual's self-efficacy, such as positive emotional support, encouraging words, constructive persuasion, role models, and the experience of mastering a task. Additionally, Conger and Kanungo (1988) highlighted empowerment as a motivating concept, defining it as a "process in which an individual's confidence in their ability to achieve goals is strengthened." (p. 474, as cited in Cheong et al., 2016). Their five-stage empowerment process clarifies the connection and functioning of this motivating concept, establishing a theoretical foundation for the positive correlation between delegative leadership and employees' work role performance by enhancing self-efficacy. Previous studies have shown that delegative leadership positively affects subordinates' self-efficacy (Ahearne et al., 2005; Biemann et al., 2015; Dorji, 2015; Kim et al., 2017; Dağlı et al., 2021). Primary school teachers under delegative leadership also exhibit strong self-efficacy in their organizational behaviors.

However, delegative leadership can also have negative effects on teachers because it involves low instructional and supportive behaviors. Subordinates under this type of leadership often need to take responsibility for their work, set their own goals, and control the work process, which can lead to additional stress. This is because teachers' previously constructed role perceptions are disrupted by leaders' delegating extra missions and responsibilities (Kahn et al., 1964). Additionally, teachers' cognitive resources are limited, and competing assignments can exhaust these resources (Kahneman, 1973). Over time, this can lead to increased fatigue. Empowerment theory (Conger and Kanungo, 1988, as cited in Cheong et al., 2016) suggests that specific characteristics of delegative leadership can significantly influence job-induced tension. Increased autonomy can raise subordinates' strain levels, counteracting the positive effects of delegative leadership on work-related outcomes (Cheong et al., 2016). Such empowering behavior can also affect other work-related outcomes, such as burnout.

Research confirms that emotional exhaustion among subordinates is influenced by empowering behavior (Schermuly et al., 2010; Gilbert et al., 2010). Mudallal et al. (2017) found that nurses' personal accomplishment is positively correlated with empowering behaviors such as meaningful work, engagement in decision-making, confidence in employees, goal facilitation, and providing autonomy. Conversely, depersonalization among nurses is negatively correlated with these factors, while emotional exhaustion is negatively correlated with engagement in decision-making. Chughtai & Rizvi (2020) verified the effect of delegative leadership on variations in subordinates' burnout. In summary, there is a clear association between subordinates' burnout and delegative leadership.

4. The relationship between the delegative leadership with the empowering behavior of leaders

Delegative leadership is one of the special leadership styles that is derived from contingency theory. It is a kind of leadership with less attention to work and less attention to employees. It was generated by Hersey, Blanchard & Natemeyer (1979) by placing each dimension specified by Fiedler (i.e., the leader's behavior according to the focus on the task or on the employee) at one end of the spectrum and then integrating them. In past literature, it can be found that there are many descriptions of this kind of leadership with less attention to work and less attention to employees, such as delegation leadership, empowering leadership, and empowerment leadership (Liu, 2015; Cheong et al., 2016; Warsono & Riduwan, 2019; Febrian, 2024). Obviously, in this case, the normative statements in describing the leadership with less attention to work and less attention to employees are not unified in academia. However, these studies do have a unified operational definition to measure the influences of delegative leadership across their research, namely the empowering behavior of leaders. In this regard, the present study introduces the term "empowering behavior of leaders" for measuring the influence of delegative leadership on the dependents in the following research design and empirical analysis.

5. Hypothesis development

Employee voice behavior often occurs in environments with weak relationships between employees and leaders, characterized by minimal instructional behaviors from leaders. Xiang et al., 2013 examined the positive roles of participative leadership on employees' prohibitive and promotive voice behavior in Chinese manufacturing, while Raub et al. (2012) navigated the role of empowerment leadership on employee voice behavior in the hospitality industry. Raub et al. (2012) examined the impact of empowering leadership on employee voice behaviour in the hospitality business. Yan (2018) conducted a literature review in a Chinese journal to examine the influence of leadership on employee voice behaviour. The study found that leadership has a favourable impact on promotive voice behaviour, which is consistent with the findings of Liu et al., 2010 who studied transformational leadership. While there is limited research on the relationship between delegative leadership and voice behavior, it is clear that delegative leadership influences various employee behaviors (e.g., organizational citizenship behavior) and outcomes (Davis et al., 2000; Gilbert et al., 2010; Jaffery & Farooq, 2015; Ali et al., 2018; Atik et al., 2020; Nong et al., 2022). This study posits that delegative leadership influences teachers' voice behavior, a relationship that is underexplored in educational management. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. The empowering behavior of leaders positively influences teachers' voice behavior.

From different theoretical perspectives, delegative leadership impacts employees' behavior through their mental states. As Conger and Kanungo (1988) empowerment theory suggests, empowerment enhances self-efficacy (Cheong et al., 2016). Leaders' empowering behaviors positively affect employees' self-efficacy (Ahearne et al., 2005; Biemann et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017; Dağlı et al., 2021). The greater the delegation of authority, the stronger the employees' self-

efficacy (Cheong et al., 2016). Atik et al. (2020) noted that teachers' perceptions of psychological empowerment, including self-efficacy, are influenced by school principals' empowering behaviors. Additional studies support the positive psychological impact of delegative leadership on teachers' behavior, such as thriving at work (Ali et al., 2018) and motivation (Davis et al., 2000; Wasserman et al., 2016). Therefore, the hypothesis is:

H2. The empowering behavior of leaders positively influences teachers' self-efficacy.

Conversely, Role theory (Kahn et al., 1964) suggests that additional tasks and duties assigned by leaders disrupt individuals' role perceptions, increasing role stress (Rizzo et al., 1970, as cited in Cheong et al., 2016). Delegative leadership can also have negative effects on employees' mental states, such as increasing stress (Cheong et al., 2016; Nong et al., 2022). Studies have confirmed that delegative leadership can contribute to subordinates' burnout (Gilbert et al., 2010; Mudallal et al., 2017; Muhammad, 2020). In educational management, Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh (2015) concluded that leadership influences teacher burnout, supported by Fernet et al. (2012). Thus, the hypothesis is:

H3. The empowering behavior of leaders positively influences teachers' burnout.

Research has demonstrated clear direct effects of delegative leadership on employees' behavior and self-efficacy. In educational management, Dorji (2015) classified principal leadership within structural, political, human resource, and symbolic frames, finding that teacher self-efficacy, as a dimension of empowerment, is influenced by leadership. Greater employee autonomy correlates with stronger self-efficacy (Cheong et al., 2016). Self-efficacy positively impacts job performance (Lai et al., 2012; Afzal et al., 2019). While few studies have explored the role of self-efficacy in employee voice behavior, it is evident that higher self-efficacy enhances work-related performance (Ahearne et al., 2005; Lai et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2017; De Simone et al., 2018). However, some studies (e.g., Judge et al., 2007) did not find a direct significant role of self-efficacy on performance. Schmidt & DeShon (2010) revealed that self-efficacy's impact varies with performance conditions, being negative under high ambiguity but positive under low ambiguity. Kim et al. (2017) discovered that self-efficacy reduces deviant behavior. Prior research also provides evidence for the beneficial impact of self-efficacy on behavioural intentions, including entrepreneurial intention (Pihie & Bagheri, 2013; Peng & Mao, 2014; Tsai et al., 2016). In the educational context, Zhang et al. (2021) proved tthat psychological empowerment has a beneficial effect on instructors' voice behaviour in the field of education. Therefore, the hypothesis is:

H4. Teachers' self-efficacy mediates the relationship between empowering behavior of leaders and teachers' voice behavior.

Cheong et al. (2016) proposed that delegative leadership can influence behavior both positively and negatively. Delegative leadership's influence on burnout is confirmed (Gilbert et al., 2010; Çavuş & Demir, 2010; Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2015; Mudallal et al., 2017; Muhammad, 2020), with

stronger burnout correlating with lower work performance (Thomas & Lankau, 2009; Sanchez-Gomez & Breso, 2020). The relationship between teacher burnout and job performance is well-documented (Klusmann et al., 2008, as cited in Saloviita et al., 2021). Burnout can mediate the role of delegative leadership on behavior, as shown in healthcare (Gilbert et al., 2010) and general employment (Jaffery & Farooq, 2015). However, there is limited research on the impact of burnout on employee voice behaviour. Therefore, the hypothesis is:

H5. Teachers' burnout mediates the relationship between empowering behavior of leaders and teachers' voice behavior.

The present study assumes that teachers' positive voice behavior can be enhanced by their self-efficacy and the leader's empowering behavior but weakened by burnout. Specifically, we hypothesize that the effect of delegative leadership on teachers' positive voice behavior is mediated by self-efficacy and burnout due to mental state changes influencing behavior. The research model and hypotheses are illustrated in Fig 1.
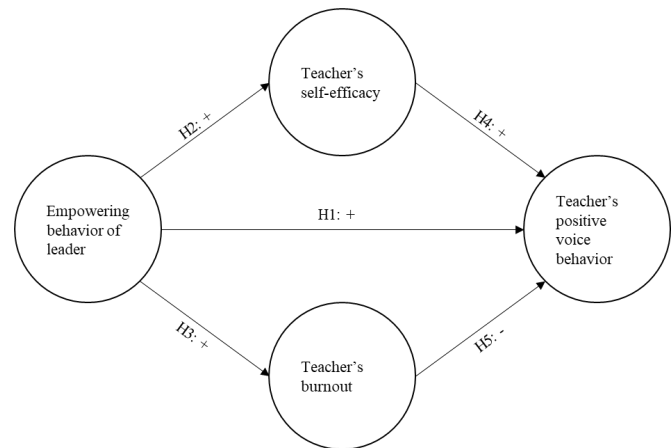
Fig. 1. Structural associations of empowering behavior of leaders, teacher's self-efficacy, teacher's burnout and teacher's positive voice behavior.

6. Method

This study employs a quantitative analysis method using a self-determined questionnaire constructed based on scales of perceived empowering behavior of leaders, self-efficacy, burnout, and positive voice behavior, refined from previous literature. The questionnaire was distributed to primary school teachers in China, inviting them to participate in the research.

6.1 Measures

To solve the research questions proposed in this paper, implement the heuristic problem sequence generation algorithm, and be able to effectively interact with students, this chapter needs to complete the following work in order. The overview of the algorithm design is shown in Fig. 1.

The questionnaire comprised 37 items: five socio-demographic questions (regarding respondents' gender, age, educational background, majors, and length of service), empowering behavior of supervisors, self-efficacy, burnout, and voice behavior for teachers. Gender was encoded as a binary variable, where a value of 1 indicated male and a value of

0 indicated female. No limits were set for the length of service and age of the teachers. Majors were categorized into three types: Theoretical, Subject, and Interdisciplinary, with Interdisciplinary majors coded as 1 and others as 0 for reference. Educational background was categorized from 'Primary school graduation and below' to 'Professional postgraduate degree,' spanning seven categories and coded from 1 to 7. This categorization assumes that the likelihood of voice behavior increases with higher educational background and age. Additionally, teachers with Interdisciplinary majors are considered more likely to speak up in management due to their diverse perspectives.

The 18-item scale of empowering behavior of leaders (Amundsen et al., 2014) is a self-report scale with two subscales: twelve items on Autonomy Support and six items on Development Support. Following Cheong et al. (2016), this study also measures employee self-efficacy using the scale from Chen et al. (2001). The scale consists of eight items, such as "I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself," "When facing difficult tasks, I am certain that I will accomplish them," and "I believe I can succeed at most any endeavour to which I set my mind". The burnout scale by Friedman (1999) is commonly used in research involving teachers and comprises fourteen items across three subscales: exhaustion, accomplishment, and depersonalization. The Van Dyne & LePine (1998) six-item measure is commonly used to assess voice behaviour in employee situations (Liu et al., 2010; Yoo, 2017). For teacher cohorts, this study refines the content to fit school management scenarios, asking respondents if they have developed and made recommendations concerning organizational issues, encouraged others to get involved in organizational issues, communicated their opinions even if different or disagreed with, kept well informed about relevant issues, participated in issues affecting the quality of work life, and proposed new projects or changes in procedures. All items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 7 indicating strong agreement. The items were also translated into Chinese. To evaluate the credibility of the questionnaire, the reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The researchers calculated the internal consistency by employing the Cronbach's alpha formula, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire questionnaire ($N = 50$).

Variables	No. of questions	Aplha
Empowering behavior of leaders	18	0.966
Teacher's self-efficacy	8	0.878
Teacher's burnout	14	0.954
Teacher's positive voice behavior	6	0.686

6.2 Participants and analytical methods

We selected and surveyed teachers employed in primary schools in Shenzhen, China. Over the past two decades, Shen-

zhen has experienced rapid economic and social development alongside unsatisfactory elementary education development. Recent reforms supported by the Chinese central and local governments aim to transform the compulsory education system at individual, organizational, and institutional levels, creating a conducive environment for diverse voices. Teachers were informed of their right to voluntary participation and the confidentiality of their responses, and they were invited to sign a consent form outlining the study's aims and objectives. Considering previous studies, time, and financial constraints, we employed non-probability sampling methods, including snowball and respondent-driven sampling (Heckathorn, 2002). The questionnaire was created using WJX.cn, with QR codes generated for respondents to scan and complete the survey. The reliability of the scales was tested using SPSS 26.0. After data collection, we conducted a test on the proposed model (Fig. 1) using a Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) approach by using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 23.0. The evaluation of overall fit was determined by considering many indicators. These included the minimum fit function chi-square (χ^2) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The RMSEA, developed by Steiger (1989, 1990), is suggested to have values below 0.10 to reflect an adequate fit. Similarly, Hu and Bentler (1999) recommended that the values of RMSEA should be equal to or lower than 0.06 for a well-fitting model. The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and the comparative fit index (CFI) are also adopted.

7. Findings

In our study, 351 valid samples from primary schools in Shenzhen, China, were analyzed, accounting for 99.2% of the total responses (Table 2). The sample demographics included 16.2% males and 83.8% females, with ages ranging from 18 to 61 years and an average age of 32.65 years. The length of service ranged from 0 to 41 years, averaging 9.24 years. Educational backgrounds varied from Senior middle school to Postgraduate education, with 63.82% holding undergraduate degrees and 68.9% majoring in subjects relevant to teaching. Based on the correlation analysis, it can be found that there are strong relationships between the empowering behavior of leaders and teachers' self-efficacy, teachers' burnout, and teachers' positive voice behavior. However, it should be noted that teachers' burnout is negatively correlated with both the empowering behavior of leaders and teachers' self-efficacy. The correlation results of the dependent and independent variables are shown in Table 3.

Fig. 2 presents that there were statistically significant paths for Hypotheses 1 and 3 relating leaders' empowering behaviour to teachers' self-efficacy, burnout, and positive voice behaviour. However, in contrast to our anticipated outcome under the Hypothesis 2, empowering behavior of leaders does not significantly positively influence teachers' burnout ($\beta = 0.263$, $p < 0.000$). In addition, the path from teachers' self-efficacy to teachers' positive voice behavior was statistically significant, suggesting that empowering behavior of leaders has an indirect effect on teachers' positive voice behavior, which is mediated by teachers' self-efficacy. This result thus

Table 2. Sample descriptive statistics of group (N = 351).

	Frequency (n = 351)	Mean (Standard Deviation)	Percentage
Gender: Male (%)	57		16.2
Age	351	32.65	
Educational backgrounds:			
Senior middle school (%)	1		0.3
Senior vocational school (%)	3		0.9
Undergraduate education (%)	224		63.8
College (%)	32		9.1
Academic postgraduate education (%)	59		16.8
Professional postgraduate education (%)	32		9.1
Length of service (for teaching)	351	9.24	
Majors:			
Theoretical majors (%)	40		11.4
Subject majors (%)	242		68.9
Interdisciplinary major (%)	69		19.7

supports Hypothesis 4. In contrast, the path from teachers' burnout to teachers' positive voice behavior was statistically and positively significant, thus failing to support the hypothesis that empowering behavior of leaders has an indirect effect on teachers' positive voice behavior, which is mediated by teachers' burnout as proposed in Hypothesis 5. However, with $SRMR = 0.066$, $CFI = 0.944$, $RMSEA = 0.162$, $\chi^2 = 20.451$, $P = 0.000$), the proposed model did not adequately fit the data from samples. Therefore, the first alternative model we tested did in fact include a connection between the control variables and the positive voice behavior of teacher. After the adjustments, it can be found that the hypothesized model was successfully fitted. The the sample data has been enhanced ($SRMR = 0.05$, $CFI = 0.983$, $RMSEA = 0.041$, $\chi^2 = 50.736$, $P = 0.019$).

Fig. 2. Standardized parameter estimates, based on maximum likelihood estimation. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$; Unstandardized coefficients is in parentheses.

To examine hypotheses 4 and 5 with detailed empirical

evidence, we conducted mediation analyses employing path analysis in the AMOS program. The path coefficient in the mediation model is given in Table 4. The findings indicate that there is a favourable impact of leaders' empowering behaviour on teachers' positive voice behaviour. The indirect effect coefficient, when mediated, was positive and reached 0.245. This suggests that teachers' self-efficacy serves as a significant mediating variable, as it was able to enhance the influence of leaders' empowering behaviour on teachers' positive voice behaviour by 0.245. This result support the Hypothesis 4. Conversely, the coefficient of the indirect effect during mediation was significant and reached 0.097, the effect was negative, this indicates that teacher's burnout does not act as an intermediary variable in the path, even interfered the effect of empowering behavior of leaders.

8. Discussions

The existing literature has established a framework highlighting the significant impact of leaders' empowering behavior on subordinates' positive voice behavior, whether directly (Raub et al., 2012; Xiang et al., 2013) or indirectly through self-efficacy and burnout (Gilbert et al., 2010; Çavuş & Demir, 2010; Lai et al., 2012; Jaffery & Farooq, 2015; Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2015; Cheong et al., 2016; Mudallal et al., 2017; Afzal et al., 2019; Muhammad, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). However, in order to fully comprehend teachers' positive voice behavior, it is essential to analyse the influence of leaders' empowering behaviour and the ways in which it impacts this behaviour.

Although some studies have examined how leaders' empowering behaviour impacts teachers' performance by considering both positive and negative psychological pathways, there is a lack of research specifically examining teachers' positive voice behaviour. Positive voice behaviour refers to

Table 3. Pearson correlation coefficient for the variables (N = 351).

	Empowering behavior of leaders	self-efficacy	burnout	positive voice behavior
Means	5.404	5.374	4.005	4.588
Standard deviation	0.991	0.831	1.199	0.964
Empowering behavior of leaders	1	0.630***	-0.263***	0.319***
Teacher's self-efficacy		1	-0.344***	0.377***
Teacher's burnout			1	0.191***
Teacher's positive voice behavior				1

Notes: N = 351. There was no missing value across other variables. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

the voluntary and beneficial communication of thoughts, recommendations, or worries with the goal of enhancing the organisation. This study addresses this gap by analysing the roles of leaders' empowering behavior and its mediating effects through self-efficacy and burnout on teachers' positive voice behavior.

To thoroughly understand the effect of leaders' empowering behavior on teachers' positive voice behavior, it is crucial to control for the impacts of length of service, gender, and age. These factors can significantly impact the degree to which teachers 'speak up.' Our structural equation modelling aligns with existing research, indicating that leaders' empowering behavior and teachers' self-efficacy significantly improve teachers' positive voice behavior in the working environment (Raub et al., 2012; Pihie & Bagheri, 2013; Xiang et al., 2013; Peng & Mao, 2014; Tsai et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2021).

Further analysis reveals that teachers' self-efficacy partially mediates the impact of leaders' empowering behavior on teachers' positive voice behavior, consistent with existing research (Cheong et al., 2016). This suggests that leaders can enhance positive voice behavior by improving teachers' self-efficacy. These findings challenge Kim et al. (2017) assertion of the negative impacts of self-efficacy on deviant behavior. It can be concluded that delegative leadership, with less attention to work and employees, can motivate teachers to actively engage in governance. In fact, for teachers, positive voice behavior is not a main job duty, but rather a sub-goal within their career paths, or a goal for their own achievements of personal growth or pursuit of a sense of accomplishment. Delegative leadership provides a relatively free and unconstrained atmosphere for teachers to pursue their individual career goals, including internal goals related to their personal growth. Teachers will have certain internal motivation to perform actions irrelevant to their main working duties to achieve their own internal goals. This explains why teachers' self-efficacy can strengthen the effect of leaders' empowering behavior on their positive voice behavior.

On the contrary, the negative impact of leaders' empowering behavior on teachers' burnout found in this study did not align with previous literature (Gilbert et al., 2010; Çavuş & Demir, 2010; Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2015; Mudallal et al., 2017; Muhammad, 2020). These results revealed that a free and unconstrained atmosphere can support the mitigation

of burnout, at least in the context of education. Teachers under a relatively free and unconstrained atmosphere can have a high degree of autonomy in their work, rather than having to face a series of regulations and guidance from superiors or others. Similarly, the atmosphere created by such leadership style motivates teachers who are feeling burnout to freely and confidently express their positive opinions about deficiencies in governance. This sense of control that teachers feel can promote stress relief in their mental state and facilitate the elimination of negative emotions.

Interestingly, burnout was found to promote certain positive voice behaviors of teachers, contradicting existing research on employee behavior (Jaffery & Farooq, 2015; Sanchez-Gomez & Breso, 2020). In addition, undoubtedly, burnout will result in employees expressing their discontent and performing some negative behaviors. However, the empirical result provides a possible assumption, namely that employees might express their discontent through positive behavior even when they are exhausted. This kind of positive behavior in employees may be influenced by other mixed factors derived from the organization, such as organizational support, organizational commitment, affective commitment, and so on. Perhaps pursuing minimalist model explanations of the relationship between mental status and people's behavior is not a perfect approach; complex models are still essential.

Furthermore, the present study discovered no evidence to substantiate the idea that teachers' burnout has any impact on either improving or weakening the influence of leaders' empowering behaviors on teachers' positive voice behaviors. This challenges current research suggesting that delegative leadership can improve organizational behavior and performance by mitigating negative psychological symptoms (Gilbert et al., 2010; Cheong et al., 2016). As mentioned above, the link between employees' burnout and their positive behavior may need further exploration and examination, including various factors from the organization. The conditions created by leadership style may not influence the positive behavior of employees by mitigating their negative status.

8.1 Implications for Educational Management

Given that positive voice behavior is not a common workplace behavior, we hesitate to recommend managers focus solely on enhancing positive psychological states to achieve

Table 4. The indirect effects of hypothesized model.

	Indirect effects	
	Estimates	95% Confidence Interval with Bootstrap Correction
Total	0.148	
EBOL → TSE → TPVB	0.245 (0.040)	[0.171; 0.330]
EBOL → TBO → TPVB	-0.097 (0.023)	[-0.145; -0.056]

Notes: Total effect empowering behavior of leaders → $TPVB$ = 0.319 (0.049); standard error is in parentheses; TSE = teacher's self-efficacy; TBO = teacher's burnout; $TPVB$ = teacher's positive voice behavior.

organizational or systemic transformation through certain behaviors. We suggest that managers should actively create an atmosphere to promote employees' internal motivation. Particularly in Chinese fundamental education, we strongly suggest that educational managers prioritize mechanisms that enhance teachers' positive psychological states by actively reforming from the top to create an atmosphere beneficial for motivating the internal dynamics of teachers, their work behavior, and performance, especially behaviors affecting the organization and system. This study also challenges the stereotype that employees in state-owned or government-owned enterprises are merely obedient. In fact, these civil servants will have their own motivations, confidences, and ambitions to achieve some of their own individual goals at the same time when they are fulfilling their main working duties. They will perform some behaviors related to their own individual goals with high internal motivation when they are sufficiently conditioned to be motivated, while these behaviors may be beneficial for the organizations to achieve transformation. Considering Shenzhen's reform direction towards high-quality development, we suggest that Shenzhen's educational management focus on systematic design. Increasing empowering behaviors towards subordinates can elevate positive voice to the reform agenda. Such a top-down system design effectively motivates bottom-up transformation.

9. Limitations

This study focused on individual behavior from a psychological perspective, while neglecting the effects of the environment and the interactions between the environment and individuals. Bandura's social learning theory (1977) suggests that individual's behaviors are shaped by their cognition, actions, and the environment in which they reside. Future research should navigate the effects of the environment and the interactions between the environment and individuals on behavior. This includes examining the influence of colleagues, administrative structures, working contexts, social relations, and social networks.

10. Conclusion

This study explores the psychological mechanisms by which delegative leadership affects teachers' positive voice behavior within the context of educational management. The findings emphasis the significant impact of leaders' em-

powering behavior on teachers' self-efficacy and positive voice behavior, while burnout did not play a mediating role. Specifically, it was discovered that self-efficacy plays a role in somewhat connecting leaders' empowering behavior and teachers' positive voice behavior, suggesting that enhancing teachers' self-efficacy can promote positive voice behavior. Of course, to delve deeper, future research can explore contextual factors such as the role of colleagues, administrative structures, working environments, and social networks to offer a thorough insights into the factors influencing teachers' voice behavior.

The study provides useful insights for educational leaders seeking to cultivate an environment in which instructors feel empowered to articulate their ideas and suggestions. By focusing on strategies that enhance self-efficacy, such as providing autonomy, positive reinforcement, and professional development opportunities, school leaders can encourage teachers to engage in positive voice behavior, contributing to organizational improvement and innovation.

In summary, this study emphasises the significance of delegative leadership in educational settings and its potential to enhance teachers' positive voice behavior through improved self-efficacy. By understanding and leveraging these psychological mechanisms, school leaders can create a more open, collaborative, and innovative educational environment.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

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