

# Leading with Empathy, Teaching with Excellence: A Study among University Educators in Guizhou, China

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## Abstract

This study examines the relationship between perceived leadership empathy and university educators' job performance in public teacher-training universities in Guizhou Province, China. Despite growing interest in leadership empathy as a key leadership competency, quantitative evidence in less-developed regional higher education contexts remains limited. Using a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 229 full-time university educators. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple regression analyses were conducted while controlling for relevant demographic characteristics. The results indicated a significant positive association between perceived leadership empathy and teachers' job performance, including task, contextual, and adaptive performance. Leadership empathy also remained a strong predictor of job performance after controlling for demographic variables. No significant differences were found across gender or academic discipline. Overall, the findings provide context-specific evidence that leadership empathy is meaningfully linked to university educators' job performance and underscore the value of empathy-based leadership practices in similar higher education settings.

## Keywords

Leadership Empathy, Job Performance, Educational Leadership, Higher Education, Teacher-Training Universities

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background and Significance

In recent years, higher education institutions have faced increasing pressure to

maintain teaching quality, enhance research productivity, and respond to growing administrative demands. University educators are often required to balance multiple professional roles under intensified performance evaluation systems. These pressures have contributed to rising levels of work-related stress and growing concerns about sustaining high levels of job performance (Cheng et al., 2023; Hu, 2024).

Within this environment, educational leadership has become a critical factor shaping teachers' work experiences. Leadership behaviors influence how institutional demands are communicated, interpreted, and managed at the individual level. Research in organizational and educational settings suggests that leadership approaches emphasizing support and interpersonal sensitivity play an important role in fostering positive work environments and promoting employee performance (Wong & Law, 2002; Kock et al., 2019).

Empathy has increasingly been recognized as a core leadership competency, reflecting leaders' capacity to understand others' perspectives and respond to work-related challenges in a supportive manner. Empathetic leadership has been associated with positive outcomes for employee engagement and performance across diverse contexts (Falahat, 2019). In Chinese higher education, where institutional demands continue to intensify and regional disparities persist, examining leadership empathy may provide valuable insights into how relational leadership qualities contribute to sustaining teachers' job performance. Accordingly, this study explores the relationship between perceived leadership empathy and teachers' job performance in public teacher-training universities.

## 1.2. Research Gap and Purpose

Although existing research has increasingly acknowledged the importance of empathy in educational leadership, several gaps remain. Much of the empirical evidence on leadership empathy has been generated in Western or economically developed contexts, whereas studies conducted in less-developed regions and culturally diverse settings remain limited. As a result, the applicability of existing findings to underrepresented contexts within Chinese higher education is not yet fully clear (Falahat, 2019; Kock et al., 2019).

In addition, prior studies examining the relationship between leadership empathy and teacher performance have often relied on conceptual discussions or qualitative approaches. Quantitative research using standardized instruments to assess both perceived leadership empathy and multidimensional job performance remains relatively scarce, particularly in Chinese universities (Georgiadis & Arvanitidou, 2025). Moreover, although positive associations have been reported, the predictive role of leadership empathy has not been sufficiently examined in higher education settings. Limited empirical attention has also been paid to whether demographic characteristics meaningfully shape empathy–performance relationships.

Regional disparities within China further underscore the need for context-specific empirical evidence. Teacher-training universities in Guizhou Province oper-

ate under conditions of limited resources and increasing institutional demands, yet systematic quantitative research on leadership empathy in this setting remains scarce. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between perceived leadership empathy and teachers' job performance in public teacher-training universities in Guizhou Province, China. By adopting a quantitative survey approach, the study contributes empirical evidence from an underexplored regional and institutional context and enhances understanding of how empathy-related leadership behaviors are associated with teachers' professional performance in higher education.

### **1.3. Contribution of the Study**

This study offers both theoretical and practical contributions to research on educational leadership. Theoretically, it extends existing discussions on leadership empathy by providing quantitative empirical evidence from Chinese higher education, a context that has received relatively limited attention in prior research. By conceptualizing leadership empathy as a measurable leadership attribute and examining its relationship with teachers' job performance, the study contributes to a more contextually grounded understanding of empathy-based leadership in higher education institutions.

From a practical perspective, the study provides evidence-based insights for educational leadership practice and policy. The findings highlight the relevance of leadership empathy in supporting teachers' professional performance, offering implications for leadership development, training programs, and faculty support systems in universities. In the context of teacher-training universities in Guizhou Province, the study also provides localized empirical evidence that may inform leadership evaluation and management practices aimed at promoting sustainable performance and fostering supportive organizational climates.

## **2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development**

This section reviews relevant literature on leadership empathy and teacher job performance in educational contexts. It synthesizes theoretical perspectives and empirical findings to clarify key constructs and their relationships, and it develops the research hypotheses examined in this study.

### **2.1. Leadership Empathy in Educational Contexts**

Empathy is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct involving the capacity to understand others' perspectives and to resonate with their emotional experiences. In psychological and leadership research, cognitive empathy refers to the ability to accurately comprehend another person's thoughts, intentions, and viewpoints, and is often described as perspective-taking or empathic accuracy (Davis, 1983; Ickes, 1993). Affective empathy, in contrast, reflects emotional responsiveness and the capacity to share or resonate with others' feelings (Decety & Jackson, 2004). Together, these dimensions capture both the rational and emo-

tional components of empathic engagement.

In leadership contexts, empathy extends beyond an internal disposition and is increasingly viewed as a relational competence enacted through social interaction. Leaders demonstrate empathy through communication behaviors such as attentive listening, perspective-checking, and supportive responses, which shape how subordinates interpret leadership intentions and organizational demands (van Nistelrooij, 2020). Empathetic leadership has been associated with positive relational outcomes, including stronger leader-member relationships, trust, and motivation, suggesting that empathy functions as a context-sensitive leadership capability rather than a purely affective trait (Rasmussen, 2019; Fuller, 2023).

Within educational settings, leadership empathy is particularly relevant given the interpersonal and emotionally demanding nature of academic work. University educators often face competing expectations related to teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities, making leaders' sensitivity to staff perspectives and emotional experiences especially salient. Empathy in educational leadership has been linked to supportive organizational climates and positive professional outcomes for teachers, highlighting its relevance as a leadership competency in higher education institutions (Thompson, 2018). However, higher education research has rarely examined the distinct roles of cognitive and affective empathy or tested their empirical associations with teachers' job performance in non-Western and resource-constrained contexts. This gap provides a foundation for the present study's focus on leadership empathy in teacher-training universities in Guizhou Province.

## 2.2. Job Performance of University Educators

Job performance is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct referring to behaviors that contribute to organizational goals, rather than a single evaluative outcome. In organizational psychology, job performance is understood as behavior-based and episodic, encompassing multiple facets that reflect how individuals carry out their professional roles (Campbell & Wiernik, 2015). This perspective emphasizes that performance should be assessed through observable work-related behaviors rather than global or outcome-only indicators.

A widely accepted framework distinguishes between task performance and contextual performance. Task performance refers to behaviors directly involved in core job duties, such as fulfilling assigned responsibilities and producing required outputs. Contextual performance, by contrast, includes discretionary behaviors that support the social and psychological environment of the organization, such as cooperation, persistence, and organizational citizenship (Borman & Motowidlo, 2014). Together, these dimensions capture both role-prescribed and extra-role contributions to organizational effectiveness. Subsequent research has highlighted adaptive performance as an additional component of job performance, reflecting individuals' capacity to respond effectively to change, solve novel problems, and adjust to dynamic work demands (Pulakos et al., 2000). Empirical work has shown that task, contextual, and adaptive performance are conceptually distinct yet in-

terrelated facets of individual work performance (Koopmans et al., 2014a, 2014b).

In educational contexts, the multidimensional nature of job performance is particularly salient. University educators' task performance typically involves teaching, assessment, and assigned academic or administrative duties. Contextual performance is reflected in collegial cooperation, mentoring, service to departments or programs, and contributions to institutional functioning beyond formal role requirements. Adaptive performance captures educators' ability to adjust teaching strategies, integrate new technologies, and respond flexibly to curriculum reforms and changing student needs. Prior studies in higher education have shown that emotional and relational competencies are meaningfully associated with these performance dimensions, underscoring the relevance of leadership-related factors for understanding teachers' professional effectiveness (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2010; Falahat, 2019). Taken together, this literature supports a multidimensional, behavior-based conceptualization of university educators' job performance and provides a theoretical foundation for examining how leadership empathy relates to performance outcomes in higher education institutions.

### 2.3. Leadership Empathy and Job Performance

A growing body of international research provides consistent evidence that leadership empathy is positively associated with employees' job performance across organizational contexts. Large-scale and cross-cultural studies indicate that empathetic leadership behaviors enhance leadership effectiveness and are linked to higher individual performance ratings (Sadri et al., 2011). Empirical research further suggests that leaders' emotional support and understanding foster positive affect, intrinsic motivation, and psychological safety, which in turn promote performance-related behaviors (Kock et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2024). Systematic reviews and meta-analytic evidence on emotional intelligence, a construct encompassing empathy, similarly indicate that leaders' emotional competencies are robust predictors of task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors across cultures (Miao et al., 2017; Muss et al., 2025).

In educational and higher education contexts, comparable patterns have been observed. Studies of university faculty indicate that leaders' empathy-related and socio-emotional capabilities are positively associated with teachers' professional performance, engagement, and innovation (Falahat, 2019; Asmamaw & Semela, 2023). Research conducted in Asian and Chinese universities further suggests that supportive and emotionally attuned leadership contributes to teachers' task, contextual, and adaptive performance by fostering trust, psychological resources, and positive work climates (Ma et al., 2024; Abid et al., 2025). However, much of this literature relies on broad emotional-intelligence constructs or qualitative evidence, leaving uncertainty regarding the specific role of leadership empathy and its distinct dimensions in shaping university educators' performance.

From a theoretical perspective, the empathy-performance relationship can be

understood through relational and affective mechanisms emphasized in social exchange and affective events frameworks. Empathetic leadership behaviors signal care and support, encouraging reciprocal positive attitudes and discretionary effort, while also shaping teachers' emotional experiences at work. In the Chinese higher education context, these mechanisms may be particularly salient due to cultural norms emphasizing hierarchical relationships, moral responsibility, and relational harmony. Empirical research on paternalistic and benevolent leadership suggests that leaders' caring and empathetic behaviors are associated with higher job satisfaction, commitment, and performance among Chinese employees (Cheng et al., 2004; Liu et al., 2021). Taken together, existing international and context-specific evidence provides a strong theoretical and empirical foundation for expecting a positive relationship between perceived leadership empathy and university educators' job performance, which is examined in the present study.

## 2.4. Hypotheses Development

Based on the theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence reviewed above, the following hypotheses are proposed to guide the quantitative analyses in this study.

H<sub>1</sub>: Leadership empathy is positively related to university educators' job performance.

H<sub>2</sub>: Leadership empathy significantly predicts university educators' job performance.

H<sub>3</sub>: Perceived leadership empathy and job performance differ across demographic groups (e.g., gender and academic discipline) among university educators.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design to examine the relationship between perceived leadership empathy and university educators' job performance in public teacher-training universities in Guizhou Province, China. Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire, which was appropriate for capturing educators' perceptions and self-reported work-related behaviors and for conducting statistical analyses of relationships among study variables.

The cross-sectional design indicates that data were collected at a single point in time, allowing the examination of associations between leadership empathy and job performance without implying causal relationships. Consistent with the research objectives, the study adopted a correlational approach to assess the strength and direction of relationships between variables and to evaluate the extent to which leadership empathy explains variation in teachers' job performance.

### 3.2. Participants and Data Collection

The participants were full-time university educators employed at public teacher-training universities in Guizhou Province, China. These institutions represent the

main public normal universities in the province and operate under the administration of the provincial education authority. Eligible participants included teaching assistants, lecturers, associate professors, and professors who were actively engaged in teaching and academic work.

Data were collected using a self-administered online questionnaire and a non-probability sampling approach. Specifically, convenience sampling combined with snowball sampling was employed. The survey link was initially distributed to educators known to the researcher through academic connections within the target teacher-training universities. These initial participants then shared the survey link with educators in the other target public teacher-training universities in Guizhou Province, who further disseminated it within their own institutions (e.g., via teachers' WeChat groups) to reach eligible respondents. In addition, the researcher's former undergraduate supervisor, who currently holds a leadership position and has extensive professional connections, assisted in disseminating the survey link across the target universities. Family contacts working in the participating universities also helped circulate the survey link. To ensure that only eligible respondents participated, screening questions were embedded at the beginning of the questionnaire, and only full-time educators meeting the inclusion criteria were allowed to proceed.

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to survey completion. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured throughout the data collection process. A total of 229 valid questionnaires were retained after data screening and quality checks and were included in the final analyses. This sample size was considered adequate for the correlational and regression analyses conducted in the study.

### **3.3. Instruments**

#### **3.3.1. Leadership Empathy**

Perceived leadership empathy was measured using a self-report scale adapted from the Empathy Scale for Teachers (EST) developed by Wang et al. (2022). The scale assessed university educators' perceptions of their leaders' empathetic behaviors, encompassing both cognitive and affective dimensions. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The leadership empathy scale demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency reliability in the present study (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.79$ ).

#### **3.3.2. Job Performance**

University educators' job performance was assessed using a multidimensional self-report scale adapted from the Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ) developed by Koopmans et al. (2014a), Koopmans et al. (2014b). The instrument captures three components of job performance: task performance, contextual performance, and adaptive performance. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The overall job performance scale showed good internal consistency reliability in this study (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analyses, and multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine relationships among variables and to test the proposed hypotheses. Relevant demographic variables were included as controls, and statistical significance was evaluated at the 0.05 level.

### 3.5. Common Method Bias

Because the study relied on self-reported data collected from the same respondents at a single point in time, the potential influence of Common Method Bias (CMB) was considered. Harman's single-factor test was conducted using principal component analysis with an unrotated factor solution. The results showed that the first factor accounted for 29.474% of the total variance, which is below the 50% criterion commonly used to indicate substantial method bias. Therefore, CMB was unlikely to have materially influenced the observed relationships in this study.

## 4. Results

This section reports the results of the statistical analyses conducted in this study.

Descriptive statistics are first presented to summarize the demographic and professional characteristics of the respondents, followed by descriptive statistics of the main study variables. Pearson correlation and regression analyses are then reported to examine the relationship between leadership empathy and job performance among university educators. Finally, group differences across selected demographic variables are examined.

### 4.1. Sample Characteristics

The study sample consisted of 229 full-time university educators from public teacher-training universities in Guizhou Province, China. The demographic and professional characteristics of the respondents are presented in **Table 1**.

As shown in **Table 1**, the gender distribution of the sample was relatively balanced, with male and female respondents accounting for comparable proportions of the total sample, while a small number of participants chose not to disclose their gender. With regard to professional title, respondents were mainly distributed across assistant lecturer, lecturer, and associate professor ranks, with a smaller proportion holding full professorships.

In terms of academic discipline, more than half of the respondents were from education-related fields, followed by humanities and social sciences, while a smaller proportion represented science and engineering disciplines. Regarding length of service at the current institution, most respondents reported between one and six years of service, indicating that the sample primarily consisted of early-to mid-career university educators. The mean age of the respondents further supports this distribution.

Overall, the sample characteristics suggest adequate variation in demographic and professional backgrounds, providing an appropriate basis for examining university educators' perceptions of leadership empathy and their self-reported job performance.

**Table 1.** Demographic profiles.

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	111	48.5
	Female	110	48.0
	Prefer not to disclose	8	3.5
Professional title	Assistant lecturer	71	31.0
	Lecturer	72	31.4
	Associate professor	74	32.3
	Professor	12	5.2
Academic discipline	Education-related fields	127	55.5
	Humanities & social sciences	81	35.4
	Science & engineering	21	9.2
Length of service at current institution	1 - 3 years	96	41.9
	4 - 6 years	84	36.7
	More than 6 years	49	21.4
Age	Mean (SD)	34.70	4.43

Note: Percentages are calculated based on the total sample (N = 229). For the gender variable, eight respondents selected "prefer not to disclose".

## 4.2. Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the main study variables, including leadership empathy and teacher job performance. For each variable and its corresponding dimensions, the mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values were examined to describe the distribution of responses.

As presented in **Table 2**, the overall level of perceived leadership empathy among university educators was at a moderate level. Similar patterns were observed for its two dimensions, cognitive empathy and affective empathy. With respect to teacher job performance, the overall performance score and its three dimensions—task performance, contextual performance, and adaptive performance—also exhibited moderate mean values with acceptable variability.

Overall, the descriptive statistics indicate sufficient dispersion across all main variables, supporting the suitability of the data for subsequent correlation and regression analyses.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of leadership empathy and teacher job performance (N = 229).

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Leadership empathy (overall)	3.52	0.58	1.58	4.75
Cognitive empathy	3.50	0.66	1.33	4.83
Affective empathy	3.54	0.63	1.67	4.67
Teacher job performance (overall)	3.61	0.63	1.58	4.75
Task performance	3.60	0.70	1.25	5.00
Contextual performance	3.65	0.74	1.50	5.00
Adaptive performance	3.59	0.73	1.00	5.00

### 4.3. Correlation Analysis

Pearson product-moment correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between leadership empathy and teacher job performance. The correlation coefficients among the main study variables are presented in **Table 3**.

As shown in **Table 3**, overall leadership empathy was positively and significantly correlated with overall teacher job performance. Both cognitive empathy and affective empathy were also significantly associated with overall job performance. Furthermore, leadership empathy and its two dimensions were positively correlated with all three dimensions of job performance, including task performance, contextual performance, and adaptive performance.

All observed correlations were positive and statistically significant at the 0.01 level, providing preliminary support for the hypothesized relationships and justifying subsequent regression analyses.

**Table 3.** Pearson correlations among leadership empathy and teacher job performance variables (N = 229).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Leadership empathy (overall)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
2. Cognitive empathy	0.91**	—	—	—	—	—	—
3. Affective empathy	0.90**	0.65**	—	—	—	—	—
4. Teacher job performance (overall)	0.77**	0.70**	0.69**	—	—	—	—
5. Task performance	0.62**	0.57**	0.56**	0.84**	—	—	—
6. Contextual performance	0.68**	0.62**	0.62**	0.87**	0.59**	—	—
7. Adaptive performance	0.67**	0.62**	0.60**	0.88**	0.61**	0.65**	—

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed).

### 4.4. Regression Analysis

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive effect of leadership empathy on teacher job performance. Two models were specified. In Model 1, gender, age, professional title, academic discipline, and length of service at the current institution were entered as control variables. In Model 2,

leadership empathy was added as the key independent variable. The regression results are summarized in **Table 4**.

As shown in **Table 4**, Model 1 accounted for a small but statistically significant proportion of variance in teacher job performance ( $R^2 = 0.07$ ,  $F = 3.58$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). When leadership empathy was entered into the model in Model 2, the explained variance increased substantially ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.52$ ,  $\Delta F = 288.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Leadership empathy emerged as a strong and statistically significant predictor of teacher job performance ( $\beta = 0.75$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The final model explained 60% of the variance in teacher job performance ( $R^2 = 0.60$ ), providing strong empirical support for the hypothesized predictive relationship between leadership empathy and teacher job performance.

**Table 4.** Hierarchical multiple regression predicting teacher job performance (N = 229).

Variables	Model 1 $\beta$	Model 2 $\beta$
Control variables		
Length of service at current institution	-0.04	-0.02
Gender	0.10	0.10*
Age	0.11	0.03
Professional title	0.16	0.02
Academic discipline	0.13*	0.05
Independent variable		
Leadership empathy	—	0.75***
$R^2$	0.07	0.60
Adjusted $R^2$	0.05	0.59
$\Delta R^2$	—	0.52***
F	3.58**	54.86***
$\Delta F$	—	288.20***

Note:  $\beta$  = standardized regression coefficient. \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

#### 4.5. Group Differences across Demographic Variables

Supplementary analyses were conducted to examine whether perceived leadership empathy and teacher job performance differed across selected demographic groups, including gender and academic discipline. These analyses were performed to provide additional descriptive context for the main findings.

Independent-samples t tests indicated that there were no statistically significant gender differences in perceived leadership empathy or teacher job performance. Similarly, one-way analyses of variance showed no significant differences in either leadership empathy or teacher job performance across academic disciplines.

Overall, the results suggest that demographic group differences did not sub-

stantially influence perceptions of leadership empathy or levels of teacher job performance in the present sample.

## 5. Discussion

This section discusses the key findings of the study in relation to the research objectives. The results are first interpreted to explain the observed relationships between leadership empathy and teacher job performance. The findings are then situated within the broader literature, followed by a discussion of their theoretical and practical implications for educational leadership.

### 5.1. Interpretation of Key Findings

Taken together, the findings suggest that leadership empathy functions as a relational leadership resource that supports educators' work-related behaviors in higher education settings. When teachers perceive their leaders as empathetic, this relational quality appears to be reflected in more positive patterns of professional engagement and performance. This indicates that leadership empathy is meaningfully associated with teachers' professional functioning within higher education institutions.

The results further indicate that leadership empathy carries explanatory value for understanding variation in teachers' job performance beyond demographic and professional characteristics. In other words, leadership empathy appears to contribute independently to differences in teachers' performance-related behaviors, rather than simply occurring alongside performance outcomes. Within the context of this study, leadership empathy therefore emerges as a relevant factor for explaining variation in teachers' work-related behaviors.

From an interpretive perspective, these findings highlight the importance of relational aspects of leadership in shaping teachers' professional behavior. Leadership empathy reflects leaders' capacity to understand teachers' perspectives, acknowledge work-related challenges, and respond in a supportive manner. Such relational interactions are likely to foster more positive perceptions of the work environment, which are associated with higher levels of engagement in task-related, contextual, and adaptive performance behaviors.

It is important to interpret these findings with caution. Given the cross-sectional research design, the observed relationships do not imply causal effects. Nevertheless, the consistent and robust associations identified in the analyses provide empirical support for considering leadership empathy as a meaningful leadership attribute linked to teachers' job performance in higher education settings.

Rather than dichotomizing leadership empathy into high-low categories, this study treated leadership empathy as a continuous construct to preserve variability and analytical precision. Accordingly, the analyses focused on correlational and regression-based relationships, whereas group-difference tests were limited to demographic variables and interpreted as supplementary.

## 5.2. Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of the present study are largely consistent with existing research on leadership empathy and employee performance. Prior studies in organizational contexts have reported positive associations between leaders' empathy-related behaviors and subordinates' performance outcomes, suggesting that empathy constitutes an important relational leadership quality linked to work-related effectiveness (Wong & Law, 2002; Cherniss, 2010; Boyatzis, 2018). The significant relationship identified in this study aligns with these findings by demonstrating a similar pattern among university educators.

In the field of educational leadership, previous research has also highlighted the relevance of emotionally intelligent and relational leadership behaviors for teachers' professional engagement and performance. Empirical studies have shown that leadership behaviors characterized by understanding, emotional sensitivity, and interpersonal support are positively associated with teachers' work attitudes and performance-related behaviors (Iordanoglou, 2007; Mishra & Mohapatra, 2010; Nurdjan & Mahmud, 2023). The present study reinforces this line of research by providing evidence from teacher-training universities, a context that has received relatively limited empirical attention.

Compared with studies conducted in Western educational settings, the current findings also complement research emerging from the Chinese higher education context. Previous studies have suggested that teachers' work behaviors in Chinese universities are shaped not only by formal policies and evaluation systems but also by leaders' interpersonal and relational behaviors (Cheng, Chou, & Farh, 2000; Guo, 2021; Hu, 2024). The consistency between the present findings and earlier Chinese studies suggests that leadership empathy remains relevant even within highly structured and hierarchical institutional environments.

In addition, the absence of significant demographic group differences observed in this study is consistent with findings reported in prior higher education research. Studies have indicated that standardized governance structures and policy-driven performance management systems in universities tend to reduce demographic variability in teachers' work behaviors and performance outcomes (Spooren, Brockx, & Mortelmans, 2013; Campbell & Wiernik, 2015). The present results support this view by showing relatively stable perceptions of leadership empathy and job performance across gender and academic discipline.

One possible explanation for the absence of gender- and discipline-based differences in this study is the relatively standardized governance and performance management environment in Chinese public higher education institutions. In many universities, teachers' work roles are shaped by uniform institutional requirements and policy-driven evaluation systems, including workload allocation, teaching responsibilities, and performance appraisal criteria, which may reduce observable variability in work behaviors across demographic groups (Campbell & Wiernik, 2015). Such governance arrangements can contribute to more homogeneous professional expectations and behavioral norms among academic staff, thereby weak-

ening potential gender- or discipline-based distinctions in both perceived leadership empathy and self-reported job performance (Spooren, Brockx, & Mortelmans, 2013). This tendency may be particularly salient in public teacher-training universities, where institutional missions, organizational structures, and administrative procedures are often highly regulated and aligned with provincial-level education governance. Within this context, educators may evaluate leadership behaviors using relatively similar reference standards shaped by hierarchical organizational norms, which may further suppress demographic variation in leadership perceptions (Cheng, Chou, & Farh, 2000). Future research could examine whether demographic differences emerge under less standardized governance conditions or in more diverse institutional settings.

Overall, by aligning with and extending prior empirical findings, the present study contributes additional evidence supporting the role of leadership empathy as a relevant leadership attribute associated with teachers' job performance in higher education institutions.

### **5.3. Theoretical and Practical Implications**

#### **5.3.1. Theoretical Implications**

The findings of this study contribute to theoretical discussions on educational leadership by highlighting the importance of empathy as a relational leadership attribute in higher education contexts. Rather than treating leadership primarily as a structural or administrative function, the results underscore the relevance of socio-emotional and relational qualities in shaping teachers' professional behavior and performance outcomes.

By examining leadership empathy as a continuous construct, the study provides empirical support for perspectives that conceptualize leadership influences on performance as gradual and relational processes. The observed associations suggest that leadership empathy operates as an explanatory factor that helps account for variation in teachers' job performance, complementing existing leadership theories that emphasize interactional and context-sensitive leadership dynamics.

The study also extends the literature by examining leadership empathy in teacher-training universities located in a less-developed regional context of China. Empirical evidence from such institutional settings remains limited in existing scholarship. The findings therefore enrich current theoretical understanding by demonstrating that empathy-related leadership processes remain relevant within highly structured and institutionalized higher education environments, offering broader applicability for relational leadership perspectives.

#### **5.3.2. Practical Implications**

The results of this study have meaningful implications for educational leadership practice in higher education institutions. The findings suggest that leadership empathy is most salient to teachers when it is enacted through routine leadership behaviors rather than articulated as an abstract leadership value. Everyday interactions—such as listening to teachers' concerns, acknowledging professional chal-

lenges, and responding with consideration—play a central role in shaping teachers' perceptions of empathetic leadership.

In institutional settings characterized by high teaching demands and administrative pressures, empathetic leadership practices may support teachers' ability to sustain effective job performance. Sensitivity to workload distribution, flexibility in managing competing responsibilities, and timely support during periods of increased pressure can signal leaders' understanding of teachers' professional realities. Such practices may help reduce unnecessary strain and foster more positive engagement with performance expectations.

Leadership empathy is also reflected in the ways leaders communicate performance-related feedback. When evaluative responsibilities are accompanied by empathetic communication, feedback is more likely to be perceived as constructive and supportive rather than punitive. This approach can contribute to stronger leader–teacher relationships and greater acceptance of institutional performance requirements.

At the organizational level, the consistent enactment of empathetic leadership across departments is particularly important. When senior administrators model empathetic behaviors and integrate them into leadership norms and expectations, leadership empathy is more likely to be perceived as a legitimate and sustained component of effective educational leadership. Such consistency can contribute to a leadership climate that supports teachers' professional functioning and long-term performance.

## **6. Conclusion and Implications**

This section concludes the study by summarizing the key findings and highlighting their implications for educational leadership practice. It also acknowledges the limitations of the study and outlines directions for future research. Rather than reiterating detailed analyses, this section provides an overall reflection on the contributions of the study.

### **6.1. Summary of Findings**

This study examined the role of perceived leadership empathy in relation to teachers' job performance in public teacher-training universities in Guizhou Province, China. The findings indicate that leadership empathy represents a salient and meaningful leadership attribute in higher education, as university educators generally perceived empathetic behaviors as part of routine leadership practice. These perceptions suggest a shared understanding of leadership behaviors that attend to teachers' professional and interpersonal needs.

The results also show that teachers' job performance demonstrated a relatively stable pattern across the sampled institutions. Educators reported consistent engagement with their professional responsibilities, reflecting the structured nature of academic work and the influence of shared organizational expectations within higher education settings.

A significant positive relationship was identified between perceived leadership empathy and teachers' job performance. Educators who reported higher levels of leadership empathy also reported more positive performance-related behaviors. In addition, leadership empathy demonstrated a substantial predictive effect on job performance, indicating that it provides explanatory value beyond simple associations when accounting for variation in teachers' performance outcomes.

With respect to demographic characteristics, no significant differences were observed in perceived leadership empathy or teachers' job performance across gender or academic discipline. These findings suggest that leadership empathy and job performance are relatively consistent across demographic groups in the studied context, and that variation in leadership empathy may be more appropriately examined through continuous analytical approaches rather than categorical group comparisons.

Taken together, the findings provide empirical evidence that leadership empathy is closely associated with teachers' job performance in teacher-training universities. The study contributes to a clearer understanding of how empathy-related leadership behaviors relate to teachers' professional functioning within higher education institutions.

## 6.2. Implications for Educational Leadership

The findings of this study underscore the importance of leadership empathy as a core component of effective educational leadership in higher education institutions. Rather than functioning as an abstract leadership value, leadership empathy is reflected in leaders' everyday interactions with teachers and shapes how teachers perceive their work environment and leadership support.

For educational leaders, the results suggest that empathetic leadership is most effectively conveyed through routine management practices, including communication, decision-making, and responses to teachers' professional concerns. Leadership behaviors that demonstrate attentiveness to teachers' perspectives and acknowledge work-related challenges are likely to foster more positive perceptions of leadership and support sustained engagement with professional responsibilities.

The study also highlights the relevance of leadership empathy in managing academic workload and performance expectations. In institutional environments characterized by high teaching demands and administrative pressures, leaders who demonstrate sensitivity to teachers' workload conditions and professional circumstances may contribute to more sustainable performance outcomes. Such approaches can support teachers' ability to meet institutional expectations without exacerbating unnecessary strain.

At an organizational level, the findings suggest that the consistent enactment of empathetic leadership across departments is essential. When empathetic leadership behaviors are modeled and reinforced by senior administrators, leadership empathy is more likely to be perceived as an integral aspect of educational leader-

ship rather than an individual leadership style. This consistency can contribute to a leadership climate that supports teachers' professional functioning and long-term performance.

### **6.3. Limitations and Future Research**

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations that also point to directions for future research. Addressing these limitations may further advance understanding of leadership empathy and teachers' job performance in higher education contexts.

The study relied on self-reported questionnaire data to assess both perceived leadership empathy and teachers' job performance. While self-report measures are appropriate for capturing perceptual and experiential constructs, they may be influenced by individual response tendencies or social desirability. Future research may strengthen the robustness of the findings by incorporating multiple data sources, such as peer evaluations, leader assessments, or more objective indicators of performance.

The cross-sectional design also constrains the interpretation of the results. Although the analyses revealed significant associations and predictive relationships, the data were collected at a single point in time, limiting the ability to examine change over time or infer causal processes. In this context, the strong relationships observed may also reflect alternative explanations such as reverse causality or halo effects. High-performing educators may be more inclined to evaluate their leaders more favorably, resulting in higher perceived leadership empathy ratings regardless of actual leader behavior. Future studies may address these concerns by adopting longitudinal designs and collecting multi-source data (e.g., leader-rated or peer-rated performance measures) to better establish temporal ordering and reduce potential perceptual bias.

In addition, the study was conducted within public teacher-training universities in Guizhou Province, China. This contextual focus offers valuable insights into an underrepresented institutional and regional setting, but it may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could extend the investigation to different types of higher education institutions, regions, or cultural contexts. Comparative studies across institutional categories or geographic areas may further clarify the conditions under which leadership empathy is most influential.

Beyond these design and contextual considerations, future research may also explore additional variables that interact with leadership empathy. Examining potential mediating or moderating factors, such as organizational support, leadership styles, teacher well-being, or job demands, may help clarify the mechanisms through which leadership empathy relates to different dimensions of teachers' job performance.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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