

The Ambidexterity of External Accountability: Coercive and Enabling Pathways to Teacher Burnout in Mainland China

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, influenced by global neoliberalism, mainland China's education reforms have emphasized decentralization while strengthening accountability through inspections and performance-based pay for both schools and teachers. Although most studies, particularly that conducted within Western educational contexts, describe accountability as a coercive mechanism that leads to the commodification of teachers and low morale, new evidence from mainland China suggests that accountability may also empower teachers. This study examines whether external accountability functions as a coercive or enabling force and investigates its impact on teacher burnout through the lenses of psychological empowerment, coercive bureaucracy, and enabling bureaucracy. Using mediation and chained mediation models, the study analyzes data from 735 primary and secondary school teachers in mainland China. The results demonstrate that the total effect of external accountability on teacher burnout is non-significant, but a significant positive direct effect emerges after controlling for mediators. This indicates that external accountability is inherently ambidextrous—simultaneously coercive and enabling. Specifically, external accountability exerts indirect burnout-reducing effects through four pathways: diminishing coercive bureaucracy (directly and via enhanced psychological empowerment) and cultivating enabling bureaucracy (directly and via increased psychological empowerment). These enabling effects are supported by evidence that accountability fosters clear goals, structured regulations, and transparent hierarchies. Because opposing direct and indirect effects cancel each other out, the observable total effect on burnout is non-significant, masking accountability's complex influence. The findings challenge unidimensional views of accountability and highlight the need for policies and organizational structures that intentionally cultivate enabling dimensions while mitigating coercive ones to protect teacher well-being.

Keywords: external accountability; coercive bureaucracy; enabling bureaucracy; psychological empowerment; teacher burnout; ambidexterity

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, education systems across the globe have strived to school effectiveness and improvement by reforming their governance in the spirit of marketization and decentralization (Cheng, 2019). As Hawkins (2000) observes, the core theme of these education governance reforms is centralized decentralization, i.e., delegating schools with power and autonomy while holding them accountable for their performance via various measures. Indeed, there are numerous accountability measures and initiatives that monitor or discipline schools and teachers' work across different education systems, such as Ofsted inspections in England, the No Child Left Behind Act and the Every Student Succeeds Act in the US, and the Enhanced Performance Management System in Singapore. Similarly, the Chinese government has pursued education governance reforms in mainland China along the same lines (Yan, 2024). According to Su et al. (2022), the Chinese education governance reforms aim to separate the management, operation, and evaluation of public education by (1) limiting the government's role in education to planning, budgeting, and overseeing the use of the funds to ensure education right and equality, (2) granting schools greater autonomy to deliver educational service tailored to their students' needs and interests, and (3) engaging communities and stakeholders in evaluating education and school effectiveness and quality, independent of the government and schools. As in other countries, these accountability measures within China's education system typically take the form of inspection and performance-based quality monitoring (Rasmussen & Zou, 2014). For example, the government has created quality criteria and indicators for all kinds of education and developed a national system of educational inspection to check and evaluate educational activities at the central government, the province, the prefecture or city, and the county levels since the early 1990s (Zheng & Thomas, 2022). Moreover, the teachers have been answerable to students' performance on standardized tests, particularly since 2009, when teacher salary reform was implemented based on the "good performance, good pay" principle (Wang et al., 2014).

Accordingly, teachers in mainland China, **much like their counterparts elsewhere**, have faced the pressures and demands of external accountability (Tsang et al., 2023), which is an institutional force that holds them responsible for their performance to stakeholders like students and their parents through formal measures imposed by external bodies like the government (Rosenblatt & Wubbels, 2021). As external accountability is often regarded as a coercive force for teachers, the literature has argued that it is deleterious to teacher well-being (Jerrim & Sims, 2022; Tsang, 2018). Nevertheless, recent research conducted by Tsang and his colleagues (Li & Tsang, 2023; Tsang, Zhang, et al., 2025; Zhang & Tsang, 2021) presents a counter-narrative, proposing that external accountability in mainland China may be an enabling force to teachers, alleviating their burnout. They attempt to explain the findings through Green's (2023) concept of rational chaos, which describes the pervasive sense of uncertainty created by the implementation of vague, evolving rules in the Chinese education governance system. According to Green's (2023) observation, the education governance system in mainland China is a rational bureaucracy, but its formal rules and regulations are often vague and ambiguous, subject to change at the leaders' will. This institutional ambiguity generates stress and anxiety for teachers who have to perform their assigned tasks effectively and efficiently while navigating uncertain rules and regulations. In this sense, external accountability may enable teachers to do their work by providing them with clear goals, structured regulations, and transparent hierarchies, helping to navigate the rational chaos within the Chinese education governance system.

However, this enabling perspective has received little empirical attention, because most existing studies on external accountability and teacher burnout have been conducted in Western contexts (e.g., Anagnostopoulos, 2003; Calvert et al., 2025; Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020; Jerrim & Sims, 2022), where the education governance systems are not characterized by the same degree of rational chaos as mainland China (Green, 2023). As a result, researchers are inclined to focus on the coercive dimension of external accountability, overlooking its potential enabling role in contexts where uncertainty is high. Therefore, studying the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout in mainland China allows us to examine the mechanisms by which external accountability operates as a coercive or enabling force for teachers, i.e., a question that remains underexplored due to the field's Western focus. Accordingly, the present study aims to fill this research gap by investigating whether external accountability functions as a coercive or enabling force for teachers in mainland China, examining its effects on teacher burnout through the lenses of psychological empowerment and coercive and enabling bureaucracy.

External accountability and teacher burnout

Burnout can be defined as the feelings of being “worn out” due to high job pressures, demands, and routinization (Freudenberger, 1974). In particular, it consists of three dimensions, namely emotional exhaustion (the feelings of being emotionally drained), depersonalization (the feelings of being cynical and detached from one's work or other persons in the workplace), and reduced personal accomplishment (the decreased sense of competence, efficacy, and achievement) (Maslach et al., 1996). The literature suggests that a lack of control, intensive workload, and insufficient rewards are major risk factors for burnout (Nápoles, 2022). Therefore, education researchers generally suggest that external accountability can lead to teacher burnout (Wright, 2020).

First, external accountability is perceived as a deskilling force because it tends to prescribe and standardize the procedures, methods, and outcomes of teaching, thereby eroding teachers' professional autonomy and subjecting teachers to surveillance (Wright, 2020). Under external accountability, therefore, teachers are inclined to lack autonomy and power to exercise control over their labor and labor process (Holloway, 2020). This condition can make them vulnerable to extra duties outside the classroom imposed by external authorities such as policy-makers and educational experts, resulting in work intensification (Smyth et al., 2000) and making it hard for them to rest, recover, and restore balance (Creagh et al., 2023). Thus, teachers are prone to stress and exhaustion due to excessive workload.

Second, external accountability can be demoralizing for teachers (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). This is because when teachers are accountable to teach in a prescribed way or achieve defined outcomes, they can find it more difficult to identify the meanings and values of their work, particularly when these expectations do not align with their moral purposes and professional values (Tsang & Qin, 2020). For example, Anagnostopoulos (2003) found that accountability policies in Chicago pressured high school teachers to prioritize test preparation over students' broader development, leading to feelings of depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment as their professional efforts and moral purposes went unvalued and unacknowledged by both the education system and the public. In this situation, teachers may come to view their work merely as a way to earn a living rather than a source of intrinsic reward (Akakalli, 2025).

Accordingly, external accountability can put teachers at risk of burnout due to its deskilling, work intensification, and demoralization effects on teachers. Therefore, external accountability should have a positive effect on teacher burnout.

H1: External accountability is positively associated with teacher burnout

Mediation role of psychological empowerment

One explanation for the impact of external accountability on teacher burnout is psychological empowerment (Segedin, 2011). Zimmerman (2000) defines psychological empowerment as the belief in one's competence, efforts to gain mastery and control over one's life, and a critical understanding of the environment. According to Spreitzer (1995), it is manifested in meaning (the value of a work goal or purpose), competence (the belief in the self-capability to perform activities with skill), self-determination (the sense of having choice in initiating and regulating behaviors), and impact (the degree to which a person can influence outcomes at work). Thus, psychological empowerment typically facilitates teachers to develop a sense of value, self-efficacy, and accomplishment, leading to an increased level of well-being (Bhattacharya & Narad, 2024) and a decreased level of burnout (Liu et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, it is less likely for teachers to experience psychological empowerment under external accountability because it tends to deskill and demoralize them (Santoro, 2011). The literature has suggested that the deskilled and demoralized teachers generally feel powerless because they are unable to impact and determine what, when, why, and how to teach and assess students, leading to a sense of meaninglessness in their work (Anagnostopoulos, 2003). Some of these teachers even begin to doubt and question their own professional competence, as they perceive their efforts as serving administrative purposes rather than students' genuine learning and growth (Day, 2017). In other words, teachers become more at risk of burnout under external accountability because they may become psychologically disempowered rather than empowered.

Therefore, external accountability may lead to teacher burnout through diminishing psychological empowerment. This suggests that psychological empowerment can mediate the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout.

H2: Psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout.

Mediation role of bureaucracy

External accountability can lead to school bureaucratization (Sunderman, 2010). For example, Pang (2002) finds that schools in Hong Kong have put greater emphasis on bureaucratic values, such as formality, rationality, achievement orientation, and administrative control, since the introduction of external accountability in education. Moreover, under external accountability, as Ingersoll (2003) observes, schools in the United States have increased both the number and enforcement of bureaucratic procedures, rules, and regulations governing teachers' work. As a rational structure, school bureaucracy is characterized by coercive formalization (the collection of formal rules, procedures, regulations, and policies that aim to enforce compliance among teachers) and hindering centralization (the hierarchical and administrative structure that obstructs rather than supports teachers' work) (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001). Through these characteristics, school bureaucracy tends to operate as a hindering structure, compelling teachers to follow its rules and pursue its goals at the expense of their personal desires and interests (Humes, 2022). As the literature has indicated, such coercive bureaucracy can increase teachers' risk of burnout because it tends to deskill and demoralize teachers (e.g., Dworkin, 1987; Tsang, 2018). In other words,

external accountability may contribute to teacher burnout via the strengthening a coercive bureaucracy.

H3: Coercive bureaucracy mediates the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout.

While school bureaucracy can be coercive, Hoy and Sweetland (2001) also highlight its enabling dimension. According to them, enabling bureaucracy is characterized by two key features: enabling formalization (the constellation of rules and procedures that help teachers address work-related problems) and enabling centralization (the authority structure that fosters cooperation and collaboration across hierarchical levels). Such characteristics tend to position school bureaucracy to emphasize shared authority within established roles, promote open dialogue, reframe problems as opportunities, respect differences, cultivate trust, learn from mistakes, and remain responsive to the unexpected (Mitchell, 2020). In other words, external accountability may foster enabling bureaucracy in addition to coercive bureaucracy. For instance, recent studies imply that external accountability in mainland China may contribute to enabling school bureaucracy by prompting schools to establish administrative structures that uphold professional standards, offer clear workflows and systems that guide and motivate teachers toward excellence, and implement transparent and equitable mechanisms for recognizing teachers' performance (Li & Tsang, 2023; Yan, 2024). As enabling bureaucracy is positively associated with teachers' collective responsibility (Wu et al., 2013), academic optimism (Gray et al., 2016), self-efficacy (Çağatay et al., 2016), and commitment (Sinden et al., 2004), it may also serve to alleviate teacher burnout (Tsang et al., 2022). Thus, external accountability may enhance the enabling bureaucracy, which in turn reduces the level of teacher burnout.

H4: Enabling bureaucracy mediates the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout.

Chain mediation of bureaucracy and psychological empowerment

Zimmerman (2000) has demonstrated that psychological empowerment is significantly shaped by organizational structures. In general, when organizational structures are hindering, psychological empowerment is less likely to occur (Weidenstedt, 2017); when structures can enable individuals, they are more likely to experience psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1996). Research has consistently demonstrated a negative relationship between coercive bureaucracy and psychological empowerment. Within coercive structures, teachers are often relegated to executing tasks prescribed by administrators, deprived of understanding or influence over the broader goals and processes of their work (Humes, 2022; Ingersoll, 2003). This separation of conception from execution is particularly problematic for professionals, as administrative priorities may stand in tension with professional judgment and values (Smyth et al., 2000). Under these conditions, teachers are less likely to experience empowerment, which in turn elevates their vulnerability to burnout (Santoro, 2011; Tsang, 2019). In other words, coercive bureaucracy may be negatively associated with psychological empowerment, and together they may function as chain mediators in the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout.

H5: The relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout is serially mediated by enabling bureaucracy and psychological empowerment in sequence.

On the other hand, empirical research has supported the positive association between enabling bureaucracy and psychological empowerment. Laschinger et al. (2001), for

example, showed that enabling workplace structure can positively affect nurses' psychological empowerment. Numerous studies have identified that psychological empowerment can mediate the effects of enabling organizational structure on job satisfaction (Paryadharshany & Sujatha, 2015). Meng et al. (2016) demonstrated that the impacts of enabling structure on job burnout can be mediated by psychological empowerment. Recently, Tsang et al. (2022) reported that enabling bureaucracy can enhance teachers' psychological empowerment, thereby decreasing their risk of burnout. As a result, the literature has suggested that enabling bureaucracy and psychological empowerment may serve as chain mediators in the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout.

H6: The relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout is serially mediated by enabling bureaucracy and psychological empowerment in sequence.

Methods

Participants

Participants were primary and secondary school teachers enrolled in professional development courses at a public university in Beijing between April and June 2020. An online questionnaire was created using Questionnaire Star, a popular platform for web-based surveys. At the conclusion of each course session, attending teachers received a link to the questionnaire and were invited to participate voluntarily. A total of 790 teachers from 10 provinces and cities—representing three regions in northern China, three in central China, and four in southern China—completed the survey. Following data screening, 735 valid responses were obtained. The demographic characteristics of this sample are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Basic information of the participants (n=735)

		n
Gender	Female	541 (73.6%)
	Male	194 (26.4%)
School Phase	Primary School	562 (76.5%)
	Middle School	74 (10.1%)
	High School	99 (13.5%)
School Quality	Key School	295 (40.1%)
	Ordinary School	440 (59.9%)
Highest Education	Professional diploma	51 (6.9%)
	Undergraduate	621 (84.5%)
	Graduate	63 (8.6%)
Homeroom Teacher Status	Yes	328 (44.6%)
	No	407 (55.4%)

Measures

External accountability was measured using a sub-scale of the Chinese version of the Personal Accountability Measure (PAM-Ch), which is designed to capture teachers' perceptions of external accountability (Tsang et al., 2023). This sub-scale consists of six items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The introductory statement for all items was: "In your work as a teacher, to what extent do you feel that it is your duty to [...]." A sample item is: "Give school

management a report on the extent to which you reached your goals at work.” In the present study, the sub-scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s α of 0.916.

Enabling bureaucracy was assessed using a sub-scale of the Chinese version of the Enabling Structure Scale (ESS-Ch), which is used to evaluate school enabling bureaucracy from teachers’ perspective (Zhang & Tsang, 2024). This sub-scale consists of six items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The sample item is: “Administrative rules in this school are guides to solutions rather than rigid procedures.” In the present study, the sub-scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s α of 0.927.

Coercive bureaucracy was measured using a sub-scale of the ESS-Ch, which is used to evaluate school coercive bureaucracy from teachers’ perspectives (Zhang & Tsang, 2024). This sub-scale consists of six items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The sample item is: “In this school, the authority of the principal is used to undermine teachers.” In the present study, the sub-scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s α of 0.907.

Psychological empowerment was measured using the Psychological Empowerment Scale developed by Li et al. (2006), which was designed to understand the sense of psychological empowerment in Chinese workplace settings. The scale comprises 12 items measuring four dimensions of psychological empowerment, namely meaning (3 items; sample item: “I find my work is meaningful”), competence (3 items; sample item: “I am confident in my ability to do work well”), self-determination (3 items; sample item: “I enjoy autonomy to decide how to do my work”), and impact (3 items; sample item: “In my work, I have a great impact on what happens”). Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). In this study, the Cronbach’s α coefficients were 0.889 for meaning, 0.952 for competence, 0.933 for self-determination, and 0.944 for impact. The Cronbach’s α for the whole scale was 0.945. ^t

Teacher burnout was measured by the Chinese version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey (MBI-ES) (Li & Wang, 2009). It consists of 15 items, rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree), assessing three dimensions, namely emotional exhaustion (5 items; sample item: “I feel emotionally drained from my work”), depersonalization (4 items; sample item: “I doubt the significance of my work”), and reduced personal accomplishment (6 items; sample item: “I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job” (score revised)). In this study, the Cronbach’s α coefficients were 0.919 for emotional exhaustion, 0.933 for depersonalization, and 0.910 for reduced personal accomplishment. The Cronbach’s α for the whole scale was 0.837.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 30.0. First, Harman's single-factor test and variance inflation factor (VIF) values were assessed to rule out concerns related to common method bias and multicollinearity. Second, descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses were performed to preliminarily explore the associations among the study variables. Third, linear regression analysis was used to examine the direct effect of external accountability on teacher burnout, and the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 6) was employed to test the chain mediation effects. Bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used to compute 95% confidence intervals (CIs). If the 95% CI for an indirect effect estimate excluded zero, the mediation effect was considered statistically significant.

Findings

Before testing the chain mediation model, Harman's single-factor test was performed to examine the presence of common method variance. The analysis yielded five factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1, with the first factor explained 36.28% of the variance, which was below the recommended threshold of 40%. This suggested that common method bias was not a significant concern in this study (Harman, 1967). Furthermore, VIF values for all independent variables ranged from 1.408 to 1.979, indicating that multicollinearity was not problematic.

Description and correction

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviation, and correlation among external accountability, enabling bureaucracy, coercive bureaucracy, and teacher burnout. The findings showed that external accountability was positively associated with enabling bureaucracy ($r = 0.559, p < 0.01$) and psychological empowerment ($r = 0.578, p < 0.01$) while negatively associated with coercive bureaucracy ($r = -0.276, p < 0.01$). Moreover, enabling bureaucracy demonstrated a positive association with psychological empowerment ($r = 0.521, p < 0.01$) and negative associations with coercive bureaucracy ($r = -0.533, p < 0.01$) and teacher burnout ($r = -0.266, p < 0.01$). On the contrary, coercive bureaucracy was negatively correlated with psychological empowerment ($r = -0.324, p < 0.01$) but positively correlated with teacher burnout ($r = -0.408, p < 0.01$). Finally, psychological empowerment was found to have a significant negative correlation with teacher burnout ($r = -0.164, p < 0.01$). Accordingly, H1 was not supported.

Table 2 Mean, standard deviation, and correlation among variables

	M	SD	EA	EB	CB	PE	TB
EA	3.930	0.757	1				
EB	3.684	0.875	0.559**	1			
CB	2.062	0.921	-0.276**	-0.533**	1		
PE	4.199	0.653	0.578**	0.521**	-0.324**	1	
TB	3.296	0.908	-0.026	-0.266**	0.408**	-0.164**	1

Note: EA = external accountability; EB = enabling bureaucracy; CB = coercive bureaucracy; TB = teacher burnout

** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed)

Chain mediation of coercive bureaucracy and psychological empowerment

To primarily examine the mediating effect of coercive bureaucracy and psychological empowerment on the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout, multiple regression analysis was applied. As Table 3 indicated, after controlling gender, age, and year of teaching experience, external accountability was negatively related to coercive bureaucracy ($\beta = -0.268, t = -7.899, p > 0.001$) while positively related to psychological empowerment ($\beta = 0.533, t = 18.402, p > 0.001$) and teacher burnout ($\beta = 0.163, t = 4.178, p > 0.001$). The results showed that coercive bureaucracy was negatively related to psychological empowerment ($\beta = -0.198, t = -6.830, p > 0.001$) while positively related to teacher burnout ($\beta = 0.401, t = 11.894, p > 0.001$). Moreover, it was noted that psychological empowerment was negatively related to teacher burnout ($\beta = -0.137, t = -3.416, p > 0.001$). These findings implied that external accountability was positively related to teacher burnout, and that the relationship may be individually mediated by coercive bureaucracy and

psychological empowerment and sequentially through coercive bureaucracy, followed by psychological empowerment.

PROCESS Macro Model 6, with the application of the biased- corrected percentile Bootstrap method (5,000 replications), was applied to examine the mediating effects. The results indicated that the direct effect of external accountability on teacher burnout was 0.163, with 95% CI [0.087, 0.240], while the indirect effect was -0.188, with 95% CI [-0.245, -0.131]. The findings suggested that the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout was mediated by coercive bureaucracy and psychological empowerment. According to Table 4, Path 1 (EA → CB → TB, effect = -0.108, SE = 0.019, 95%CI = [-0.145, -0.073]), Path 2 (EA → PE → TB, effect = -0.073, SE = 0.024, 95%CI = [-0.119, -0.026]), and Path 3 (EA → CB → PE → TB, effect = -0.007, SE = 0.003, 95%CI = [-0.014, -0.002]) were significant. The findings suggested that coercive bureaucracy and psychological empowerment not only individually mediated the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout individually but also served as sequential mediators in this relationship (see Figure 2). Accordingly, H2, H3, and H4 were supported.

Table 3 Linear regression analysis of the relationship between external accountability, coercive bureaucracy, psychological empowerment, and teacher burnout

Outcome variables	Independent variables	R	R ²	F	β	SE	t
CB		0.299	0.085	19.82***			
	Constant				-0.902*	0.384	-2.351
	Gender (0 = male, 1 = female)				0.556	0.079	0.706
	Age				0.030***	0.015	2.001
	YrTeEx				-0.016*	0.013	-1.243
	EA				-0.268***	0.034	-7.899
PE		0.663	0.384	101.88***			
	Constant				-1.154***	0.316	-3.647
	Gender (0 = male, 1 = female)				0.031	0.065	0.483
	Age				0.039**	0.012	3.211
	YrTeEx				-0.022*	0.011	-2.069
	EA				0.533***	0.029	18.402
TB	CB				-0.198***	0.029	-6.830
		0.461	0.206	36.078***			
	Constant				-0.339	0.361	-0.938
	Gender (0 = male, 1 = female)				0.340***	0.074	4.627
	Age				-0.002	0.014	-0.132
	YrTeEx				0.011	0.012	0.918
	EA				0.163***	0.039	4.178
	CB				0.401***	0.034	11.894
	PE				-0.137***	0.040	-3.416

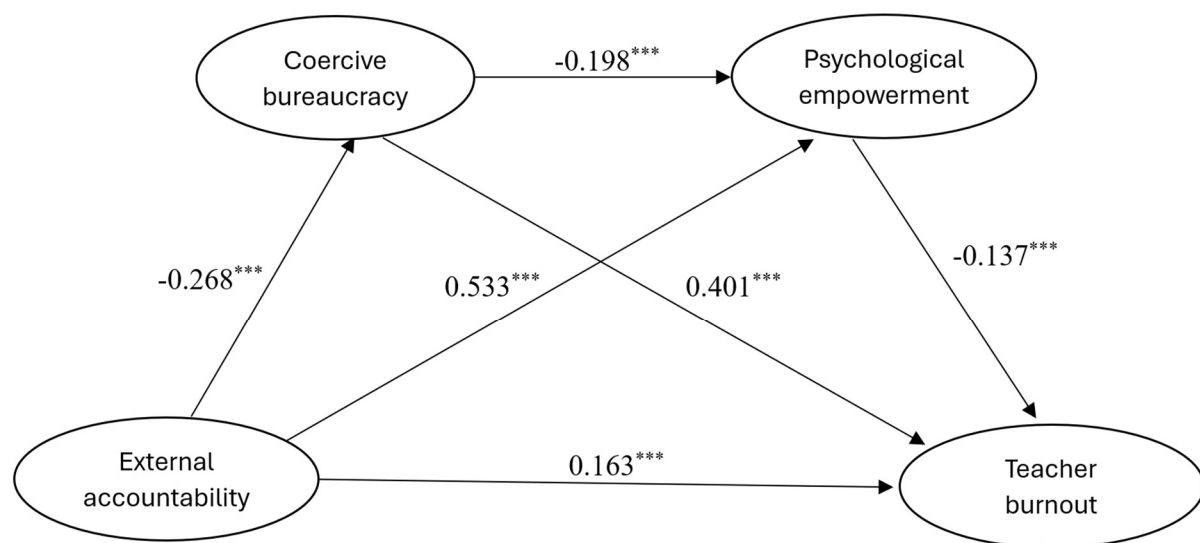
Note: YrTeEx = teaching experience; EA = external accountability; CB = coercive bureaucracy; PE = psychological empowerment; TB = teacher burnout

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Table 4 Test of mediating effects

	Effect	SE	Bias-corrected 95%CI	
			Lower	Upper
Total Effect	-0.024	0.035	-0.093	0.044
Direct Effect	0.163	0.039	0.087	0.240
Indirect Effect	-0.188	0.029	-0.245	-0.131
Path 1: EA → CB → TB	-0.108	0.019	-0.145	-0.073
Path 2: EA → PE → TB	-0.073	0.024	-0.119	-0.026
Path 3: EA → CB → PE → TB	-0.007	0.003	-0.014	-0.002

Note: EA = external accountability; CB = coercive bureaucracy; PE = psychological empowerment; TB = teacher burnout



Note: Control variables include gender, age, and teaching experience

*** $p < 0.001$

Figure 1. The relationship between external accountability, coercive bureaucracy, psychological empowerment, and teacher burnout

Chain mediation of enabling bureaucracy and psychological empowerment

Multiple regressions were computed to primarily investigate the mediating effect of enabling bureaucracy and psychological empowerment on the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout. According to Table 5, when gender, age, and year of teaching experience were controlled, external accountability was positively related to enabling bureaucracy ($\beta = 0.557, t = 18.917, p > 0.001$), psychological empowerment ($\beta = 0.426, t = 12.915, p > 0.001$), and teacher burnout ($\beta = 0.241, t = 5.515, p > 0.001$). The findings also suggested that enabling bureaucracy was positively related to psychological empowerment ($\beta = 0.288, t = 12.915, p > 0.001$) while negatively related to teacher burnout ($\beta = -0.317, t = -7.641, p > 0.001$). Moreover, it was noted that psychological empowerment was negatively related to teacher burnout ($\beta = -0.152, t = -3.559, p > 0.001$). These findings implied that external accountability was positively related to teacher burnout, and that the relationship may be mediated individually by enabling bureaucracy and psychological empowerment and sequentially through enabling bureaucracy, followed by psychological empowerment.

To further examine the mediating effects, PROCESS Macro Model 6 was used, with the application of the biased- corrected percentile Bootstrap method (5,000 replications). The results indicated that the direct effect of external accountability on teacher burnout was 0.241, with 95% CI [0.155, 0.327], while the indirect effect was -0.265, with 95% CI [-0.328, -0.203]. The findings suggested that enabling bureaucracy and psychological empowerment played mediation roles in the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout. From Table 6, it was observed that Path 1 (EA → EB → TB, effect = -0.177, SE = 0.026, 95%CI = [-0.226, -0.126]), Path 2 (EA → PE → TB, effect = -0.066, SE = 0.020, 95%CI = [-0.104, -0.027]), and Path 3 (EA → EB → PE → TB, effect = -0.024, SE = 0.008, 95%CI = [-0.042, -0.009]) were significant. The findings suggested that enabling bureaucracy and psychological empowerment not only individually mediated the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout but also served as sequential mediators in this relationship (see Figure 1). Accordingly, H2, H5, and H6 were supported.

Table 5. Linear regression analysis of the relationship between external accountability, enabling bureaucracy, psychological empowerment, and teacher burnout

Outcome variables	Independent variables	R	R ²	F	β	SE	t
EB		0.563	0.313	93.137***			
	Constant				0.238	0.333	0.715
	Gender (0 = male, 1 = female)				-0.120	0.069	-1.751
	Age				-0.006	0.013	-0.452
	YrTeEx				0.005	0.011	0.409
	EA				0.557***	0.030	18.917
PE		-1.044	0.310	-3.368***			
	Constant				-1.044***	0.310	-3.368
	Gender (0 = male, 1 = female)				0.055	0.064	0.859
	Age				0.035**	0.012	2.925
	YrTeEx				-0.021	0.011	-1.930
	EA				0.426***	0.033	12.915
TB		0.369	0.130	21.132***			
	Constant				-0.640	0.377	-1.699
	Gender (0 = male, 1 = female)				0.325***	0.077	4.212
	Age				0.009	0.015	0.601
	YrTeEx				0.006	0.013	0.459
	EA				0.241***	0.044	5.515
	EB				-0.317***	0.041	-7.641
	PE				-0.152***	0.043	-3.559

Note: YrTeEx = teaching experience; EA = external accountability; EB = enabling bureaucracy; PE = psychological empowerment; TB = teacher burnout

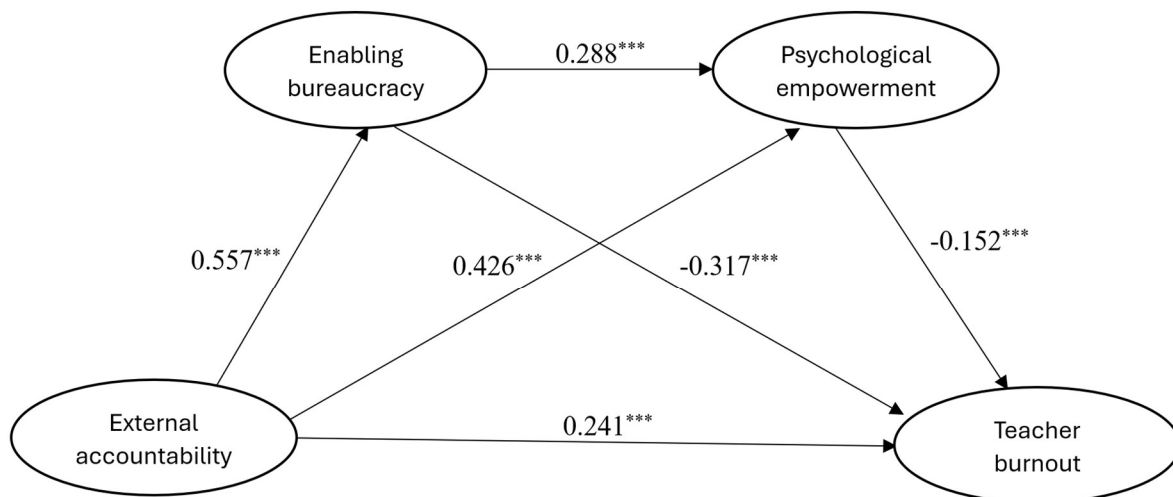
** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Table 6 Test of mediating effects

Effect	SE	Bias-corrected 95%CI
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			Lower	Upper
Total Effect	-0.024	0.035	-0.093	0.044
Direct Effect	0.241	0.044	0.155	0.327
Indirect Effect	-0.265	0.031	-0.328	-0.203
Path 1: EA → EB → TB	-0.177	0.026	-0.226	-0.126
Path 2: EA → PE → TB	-0.065	0.020	-0.104	-0.027
Path 3: EA → EB → PE → TB	-0.024	0.008	-0.042	-0.009

Note: EA = external accountability; EB = enabling bureaucracy; PE = psychological empowerment; TB = teacher burnout



Note: Control variables include gender, age, and teaching experience

*** $p < 0.001$

Figure 2. The relationship between external accountability, enabling bureaucracy, psychological empowerment, and teacher burnout

Discussion

Since the 1990s, external accountability has been introduced into education across the globe (Rosenblatt & Wubbels, 2021). A substantial body of research argues that external accountability is a coercive force that deskills and demoralize teachers, **especially in Western contexts**, because it is inclined to erode their professional autonomy by various measures that prescribe and standardize both the process and outcomes of teaching (e.g., Ingersoll, 2003; Smyth et al., 2000; Wright, 2020). This situation tends to place teachers at greater risk of burnout (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020; Jerrim & Sims, 2022; Santoro, 2011; Tsang, 2018). On the other hand, emerging evidence implies that external accountability in mainland China can enable teachers to do their work, helping them alleviate burnout (Li & Tsang, 2023; Tsang, Wang, et al., 2025; Tsang, Zhang, et al., 2025; Zhang & Tsang, 2021). Nevertheless, the findings of the present study suggest a more complex mechanism through which external accountability influences teacher burnout in mainland China.

According to the findings, the total effect of external accountability on teacher burnout, as well as their bivariate correlation, is non-significant. This absence of a simple association does not mean that external accountability fails to influence teacher burnout in mainland China. On the contrary, mediation analysis uncovers a suppression effect: several mediators, including coercive bureaucracy, enabling bureaucracy, and psychological empowerment, obscure a significantly positive direct relationship. Once these mediators are

controlled, a significant direct effect emerges. This finding tends to support the traditional conceptualization of external accountability as a coercive force. Simultaneously, the analysis reveals that external accountability exerts indirect positive effects through four distinct pathways: (1) by diminishing coercive bureaucracy; (2) by diminishing coercive bureaucracy and subsequently enhancing psychological empowerment; (3) by cultivating enabling bureaucracy; and (4) by cultivating enabling bureaucracy and subsequently increasing psychological empowerment. This enabling potential is supported by recent research in the Chinese context. For example, the studies conducted by Tsang and his colleagues (Li & Tsang, 2023; Tsang et al., 2026; Tsang, Zhang, et al., 2025) suggest that external accountability can foster clear goals, structured regulations, and transparent hierarchies that address rational chaos in education governance (Green, 2023). This may create an equitable and supportive organizational structure that empowers teachers to do their work in order to achieve their professional missions (Yan, 2024).

These findings suggest that external accountability in mainland China should be understood as inherently ambidextrous, simultaneously manifesting coercive and enabling dimensions. While its coercive dimension persists, its enabling potential is realized through positive influences on organizational structures, namely fostering enabling bureaucracy and diminishing coercive bureaucracy, and on psychological empowerment. Because these opposing dimensions co-occur in practice, they may cancel each other out in the observable relationship with teacher burnout, masking the complexity of external accountability's effects and challenging straightforward interpretation. **The ambidexterity of external accountability may be more apparent in mainland China than in other societal contexts due to its rational chaos as a governance environment characterized by deliberately vague, evolving rules that change at leaders' discretion (Green, 2023). In such a context, external accountability serves not only as an institutional force that monitors teachers' work but also as support to help them to navigate the uncertainties generated by institutional ambiguity (Yan, 2024). However, this ambidexterity is not exclusive to mainland China. Using TALIS 2018 and PISA 2018, for instance, Jerrim and Sims (2022) demonstrate that teachers in some countries, such as the US, are less likely to feel stressed about being held accountable than their counterparts in other countries, despite facing intensive external accountability pressure. This finding implies that external accountability in these countries may also exhibit enabling elements. As Allen (2023) shows, teachers thus become more capable of making sense of changing contexts, managing conflicting priorities, and resolving uncertainty and institutional ambiguity, leading to greater resilience and better adjustment to change. In other words, ambidexterity can provide a useful framework for understanding the dynamic impacts of external accountability on teachers, especially in the contexts characterized by uncertainty and institutional ambiguity, both in mainland China and beyond.**

Nevertheless, the ambidexterity of external accountability remains underexplored in the literature, leading to limited knowledge of its constitutive elements of its coercive and enabling dimensions, as well as how these opposing forces operate together. As a result, future studies should pay attention to the ambidexterity of external accountability. First, studies should seek to identify the constitutive elements of its coercive and enabling dimensions, thereby developing a more precise conceptualization and operationalization of external accountability. Second, researchers should examine the contextual and organizational conditions under which each dimension is activated. Third, attention should be directed

toward the mechanisms that determine whether, and to what extent, external accountability functions as coercive, enabling, or both, and the consequences across educational contexts.

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, as only correlational relationships can be identified. Longitudinal studies are therefore needed to establish causal directions. Second, the study examines constructs at different levels (external accountability, enabling bureaucracy, coercive bureaucracy) at the institutional level, and constructs at the individual level (psychological empowerment and teacher burnout), but multilevel analysis was not employed. This may compromise the validity of the findings. Future research should address this by utilizing multilevel structural equation modelling, which would necessitate a stratified multistage sampling approach to ensure appropriate participant selection. Third, the sample consisted of teachers who voluntarily participated in professionalization courses, suggesting that their intrinsic motivation may be higher than that of the general teacher population. Consequently, the results should be interpreted with caution, and future studies should adopt random sampling strategies at the national level to improve generalizability.

Conclusion

This study reveals that external accountability in mainland China operates as an ambidextrous force, simultaneously manifesting coercive and enabling dimensions. While a significant positive direct effect supports the traditional view of accountability as coercive, i.e., eroding teacher autonomy and increasing burnout risk, this relationship is suppressed by several mediating mechanisms. Specifically, external accountability exerts indirect burnout-reducing effects through four pathways: diminishing coercive bureaucracy, both directly and via enhanced psychological empowerment, and cultivating enabling bureaucracy, both directly and via increased psychological empowerment. These enabling effects are supported by research showing that accountability can foster clear goals, structured regulations, and transparent hierarchies that empower teachers to achieve their professional missions (Li & Tsang, 2023; Tsang et al., 2026; Tsang, Zhang, et al., 2025). Because the opposing direct and indirect effects cancel each other out, the observable total effect on burnout is non-significant, masking the complexity of accountability's influence.

To some extent, these findings advance the School Effectiveness and School Improvement (SESI) research agenda by introducing ambidexterity as a novel theoretical construct. This lens challenges the prevailing unidimensional conceptualization of external accountability, reframing the central inquiry from “Is accountability detrimental or beneficial?” to “Under which institutional conditions do coercive versus enabling pathways predominate?” Therefore, ambidexterity provides SESI scholars with a comparative framework for examining accountability across divergent education systems, such as England’s Ofsted inspection framework, US test-based accountability, Singapore’s performance management system, and mainland China’s rational chaos, thereby enabling the identification of those institutional conditions under which external accountability is most likely to foster school effectiveness and improvement.

These findings carry important practical implications. First, policymakers in mainland China and similar contexts should therefore move beyond an unidimensional view of accountability and instead design policies that intentionally cultivate their enabling potential (Rosenblatt & Wubbels, 2021). This includes developing clear goals, structured regulations, and transparent administrative hierarchies that support teachers' professional autonomy rather than merely prescribe and standardize their work (Yan, 2024). When accountability systems are designed with enabling elements, such as mechanisms that diminish coercive bureaucracy and foster psychological empowerment, they are more likely to mitigate teacher burnout while maintaining professional standards. **Beyond burnout, such policy design can serve school effectiveness and improvement because clear goals and transparent hierarchies reduce role ambiguity, enabling teachers to focus their efforts on instruction rather than navigating uncertain rules (Tsang, 2019). In systems like England's Ofsted or US test-based accountability, policymakers could introduce structured clarity (e.g., explicit evaluation criteria, developmental feedback loops) without increasing punitive pressure, thereby activating enabling pathways even within high-stakes environments.** Second, for school leaders, the findings highlight the critical role of organizational structures in shaping how external accountability affects teachers. By actively fostering enabling bureaucracy, leaders may help teachers experience accountability as a facilitating rather than constraining force. Simultaneously, efforts to reduce coercive bureaucratic practices may protect teachers from psychological disempowerment, which can lead to burnout. **Extending beyond teacher well-being, these leadership actions have direct implications for school improvement. Enabling bureaucracy, characterized by problem-solving rules, cooperative hierarchies, and shared authority, has been linked to collective teacher responsibility, academic optimism, and professional learning communities (Gray et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2013). Thus, school leaders who redesign organizational structures to emphasize enabling over coercive elements are likely to see gains not only in teacher retention but also in instructional quality and student outcomes. Therefore, schools should, regardless of the external accountability regime, audit their internal rules and hierarchies to replace punitive compliance with supportive guidance. Finally, from an SESI perspective, the ambidexterity framework offers a diagnostic tool for researchers and practitioners alike. Rather than asking whether a given accountability system is 'good' or 'bad', stakeholders can assess its balance of coercive and enabling features, then intervene to strengthen enabling mechanisms while mitigating coercive ones. This approach reframes accountability as a designable organizational feature rather than an external imposition, and provides a common framework for cross-national school improvement efforts.**

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