

A Narrative Review: The Impact of Servant Leadership on Educational Leadership Practices and Teacher Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

This narrative review delves into the influence of servant leadership on educational leadership practices and teacher empowerment. Servant leadership emphasizes the importance of nurturing and supporting individuals, with leaders playing a crucial role in fostering their followers' growth and well-being. This approach has garnered significant interest in education because it can cultivate favorable learning environments, boost teacher morale, and cultivate a spirit of cooperation. The article comprehensively analyzes existing literature on servant leadership in educational settings, exploring its impact on leadership practices and its ability to empower teachers.

Keywords: *Servant leadership; Educational leadership practices; Teacher empowerment; Leadership style in education; Positive learning environments*

Introduction

In today's fast-paced and ever-evolving world, the demand for educational solid leadership is more critical than ever. In the face of various challenges like budget cuts, standardized testing, and a diverse student population, schools require leaders who can establish a positive and productive learning environment for every student. A practical approach to educational leadership involves adopting a servant leadership mindset, focusing on serving others and fostering their growth. This paper explores the significant impact of servant leadership on educational leadership practices and the empowerment of teachers. We will discuss how adopting a leadership style that prioritizes serving others can significantly impact creating a positive school climate, empowering teachers, and ultimately enhancing student outcomes.

Methodology

This narrative review article utilizes the literature review method and scholarly sources emphasizing leadership in education, teacher empowerment, and servant leadership. The data used are articles published in the last ten years to ensure the review covered the most recent studies. Next, the articles were evaluated based on how well they addressed the topic and how much they added to our knowledge about servant leadership in schools.

Defining Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is a leadership philosophy that strongly emphasizes the leader's commitment to serving their followers. It highlights the importance of prioritizing the needs and well-being of others above one's own. In 1969, Robert Greenleaf introduced the "servant leader" (Valeri, 2007,4). Greenleaf sought to stimulate self-reflection and question established ideas about the relationship between followers and leaders by blending the contrasting ideas of "servant" and "leadership." Valeri (2007,4).

Serving leadership is a leadership style and philosophy that focuses on an individual's interactions with others to achieve authority rather than power. This approach entails a decentralized organizational structure, with leaders involving customer-facing employees in decision-making processes. The close relationship these employees have with consumers enables them to make informed decisions to both retain existing customers and attract new ones. (Kenton, 2023)

In contrast to the traditional image of the commanding leader, the servant leader places the needs of others at the forefront, prioritizing their well-being and growth through a comprehensive and forward-thinking approach. Cultivating ten key characteristics, from active listening and empathy to community building and foresight, empower others, foster collaboration, and create a positive environment where individuals and groups can thrive together. Influencing through persuasion and conceptual thinking, servant leaders become support pillars, guiding individuals and organizations to reach their full potential. (Spears, 2022)

The concept of servant leadership transcends time and cultures. Over 2,000 years ago, even ancient monarchs acknowledged their role as servants to their people, as Sendjaya and Sarros 2002 note. Although they occasionally fell short of this ideal, their acknowledgment of their duty to serve establishes the foundation for future leadership models. This idea highlights the importance of service, which is further exemplified in the impactful image of Jesus humbly washing his disciples' feet. It serves as a timeless symbol of both humility and leadership through acts of service.

According to Torodovic, 2022 Servant leadership, while heralded for its empowering nature, comes with challenges. From the time-consuming investment in genuine connections to the potential for demotivation through over-support, even well-intentioned leaders can face stagnation due to over-reliance on the leader, unclear success metrics, and confusing adaptability. It's an uphill climb demanding not just selflessness but also the emotional resilience to navigate the complexities of genuine authenticity amid shifting dynamics. Though not an easy path, proactive communication, setting clear expectations, and fostering individual accountability within the empowered environment pave the way for a more nuanced understanding of this powerful leadership style.

Servant leadership is a philosophy that strongly emphasizes the well-being and growth of followers, valuing their needs above the leader's interests. Servant leaders aim to empower others and foster collaborative environments where individuals and organizations can thrive by cultivating core virtues like humility, empathy, and foresight. Though challenging, this leadership style offers a compelling vision of authority through service over power. Its emphasis on genuine connection makes it well-suited for motivating and lifting knowledge workers in an increasingly complex world. Servant leadership is about transcending self-interest to support the greater good - a timeless concept that remains relevant across cultures and contexts.

The Impact of Servant Leadership on Academic Success

Picture yourself guiding a school not through authority and dominance but through selflessness and unwavering commitment to those who keep it running smoothly. Servant leadership presents a fresh and innovative approach, shifting the focus of educational leadership from a position of power to one of empowerment. This approach taps into the collective potential of students, teachers, and staff, fostering collaboration and growth.

Schroeder (2016) tells us that principals who exemplify servant leadership have a profound impact on teachers, nurturing their personal growth and wisdom and cultivating a mindset of service. Research shows that the influence of a servant leader principal reaches beyond individual teachers, seeping into collaborative interactions between staff, enhancing learning practices in the classroom, and permeating the broader school community and environment. Specifically, the reciprocal nature of servant leadership fosters a positive cyclical effect in which teachers, directly influenced by the modeling of servant leader principals, begin to embrace, and exhibit similar leadership qualities themselves. This transfer of leadership style leads to observable improvements in teacher effectiveness and promotes a more dynamic and engaged learning climate across the school. Indeed, the paper highlights the importance of accurately defining and then actively implementing servant leadership principles, revealing the potential of this approach to powerfully catalyze, inspire, mobilize, and empower teachers to maximize their educational impact.

Wills (2020) emphasizes servant leadership provides middle school principals with concrete behaviors to foster a high-performing culture. Leaders who prioritize the well-being and growth of their team members foster trust and motivation, which leads to school improvement. They empower their followers and work together to create a shared vision. By embracing seven essential principles, principals can create a transformative culture in underachieving middle schools, fostering a culture of continuous excellence.

Gultekin and Kara (2022) advocate the Organization Leadership Assessment Survey (OLA), which discovered fascinating insights and provided a deeper understanding of the complex connection between servant leadership and organizational dynamics. The survey's findings highlighted the importance of servant leadership in influencing organizational performance, with noticeable differences based on OLA scores. It also becomes clear that higher servant leadership scores are associated with optimal organizational performance. On the other hand, lower scores indicate areas that could use some improvement. This study emphasizes the importance of servant leadership in building successful organizations, just like in healthcare systems and schools. It highlights the tangible influence of servant leadership on essential factors like culture, trust, and overall effectiveness.

In a recent study, Lukman (2020) explored the impact of servant leadership on teacher performance. The findings emphasized principals' significant role in supporting, guiding, and empowering teachers. Principals must have a deep understanding of each teacher's individual needs and unique characteristics. This practice will allow them to provide practical guidance, mentoring, and access to learning resources. This approach promotes a cooperative and supportive environment, in line with the values of servant leadership.

In her study, Wong (2019) provided detailed insights into the effects of school leaders' adoption of servant leadership principles on teacher job satisfaction and retention in K12 schools. Interviews conducted with six experienced teachers before and after undergoing servant leadership training yielded the following findings: Teachers unanimously agree that servant leadership positively impacts satisfaction and retention. Teachers provided illustrations of leaders showcasing qualities such as listening, empathy, healing, awareness, and other essential principles. Teachers highly appreciate leaders who fulfill critical needs such as respect, protection, vision, and community. Servant leadership is in line with these needs. Teachers with servant leadership demonstrated a higher level of engagement in their demanding work. Individuals under leaders who focused less on serving others tended to rely more on their internal motivation. In addition to leadership style, other factors that influenced retention were having their children in the school, being locked in by retirement benefits, and feeling apprehensive about the unknown at other schools. However, prioritizing servant leadership was more beneficial for overall morale than retaining discontented teachers based on logistical reasons. Teachers were eager to integrate it into their classrooms.

K–12 education focuses on fostering a sense of community and prioritizing the growth and well-being of every individual involved. A student-centered approach is crucial, emphasizing personalized learning opportunities and creating a welcoming atmosphere that values diverse abilities. Servant leaders empower educators by recognizing their expertise, providing opportunities for professional development, and involving them in decision-making. This collaborative approach promotes a more innovative learning atmosphere and enhances teacher contentment. Furthermore, by promoting inclusive decision-making and maintaining open lines of communication, servant leadership fosters a collaborative environment that enhances relationships among educators, leaders, parents, and students. In addition, it is crucial to create a supportive learning environment that allocates resources toward mental health and counseling services to effectively address students' academic, social, and emotional needs. To cultivate trust and establish a positive school atmosphere, keeping everyone informed and maintaining open and transparent communication is essential. Lastly, leaders committed to growth and development consistently assess teaching methods, curricula, and administrative procedures to ensure the school's continuous improvement and progress. Together, these ideas create a learning environment led by a servant leader, prioritizing the success and well-being of educators and learners. (Schmidt, 2023)

Overall, the principles of servant leadership provide administrators with practical and meaningful strategies to improve workplace culture and address teachers' professional and personal needs. This study demonstrates that implementing servant leadership significantly influences job satisfaction and employee retention more than other incentives that may only serve to retain employees for the wrong reasons. Adopting a leadership approach that strongly emphasizes serving others enables schools to cultivate a sense of collaboration and a positive community spirit. This approach highlights the importance of fostering growth and achieving excellence at every level of the organization.

Challenges to Servant Leadership

In the reality of educational situations, obstacles for teachers attempting to apply the concepts of servant leadership are possible. Malone (2023) stated one of the biggest challenges is persuading parents, teachers, and the community to accept a change in school power relations. Educators need to put forth great effort in creating a learning environment that not only models the characteristics of servant leadership but also encourages students to embrace these ideas. This entails winning over stakeholders, teaching pupils civic duty, and encouraging bottom-up projects for significant change. Even with such heavy responsibilities, teachers can overcome these obstacles by strengthening relationships with staff and parent organizations, introducing creative strategies for cooperative learning environments, and supporting children from turbulent homes. Although there may be certain obstacles to overcome, it is evident that servant leadership has enormous advantages for educational institutions and can bring about long-lasting, good changes.

According to Schmidt (2023), Several challenges and discouraging responses come up when attempting to introduce servant leadership in K-12 schools. Challenges can arise when a more authoritative leadership style is needed to address pressing issues or implement necessary changes. In addition, there might be opposition from existing

hierarchies that prefer a top-down approach and a gradual rate of cultural change within companies. Implementation may face obstacles when staff members are sceptical or when there is a lack of clarity. There are instances where different leadership styles may be more suitable, such as during emergencies or when conflicting with established organizational practices. Implementing significant cultural changes can also be challenging and time-consuming, potentially leading to confusion or resistance from individuals unable to become familiar with this approach. For servant leadership to thrive in K-12 schools, it relies on various factors. These include being flexible, having the support of stakeholders, practicing effective communication, and being committed to gradually and persistently moving away from traditional methods. Addressing these inherent challenges is crucial for fully harnessing the potential benefits of servant leadership in the educational environment.

However, challenges not just in a leadership style but also in the learning system in general may affect its effectiveness. Taufik (2020) elaborated that developing effective learning systems in schools can be challenging and has its fair share of obstacles. Common problems include ineffective management of school organizations, strained relationships between leaders and staff, a lack of transparency in financial management, and inadequate facilities and infrastructure to support education. Some challenges that can arise in educational settings include ineffective leadership, personal issues affecting work performance, lack of authority or charisma in leaders, insufficient technological skills, and a lack of harmony between school leaders and policymakers. It is crucial to take a comprehensive approach to address these issues effectively. This involves developing strong leadership skills, enhancing relationships, promoting financial transparency, investing in infrastructure, offering technological training, and fostering collaborative partnerships with policymakers. Overcoming these challenges is crucial for establishing a nurturing learning environment that fosters the all-round growth of students.

When implementing servant leadership, it is essential to anticipate resistance from individuals deeply entrenched in traditional hierarchies. A collaborative approach is crucial in navigating this cultural shift, focusing on effective communication, building relationships, and demonstrating strong leadership. These elements are vital in overcoming challenges and creating a supportive school environment.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This review has highlighted the transformative potential of servant leadership in education. By prioritizing collaboration, trust, and open communication, servant leaders can foster an environment that empowers teachers, boosts morale, and improves student outcomes. This represents a compelling educational vision, offering a way to cultivate a vibrant school community where all members feel valued and supported in their growth.

However, successfully implementing servant leadership requires acknowledging the potential for resistance to cultural change. Traditional power structures may feel threatened by a more collaborative approach, and teachers accustomed to a hierarchical style may need time to adjust. To navigate these challenges, further research is required to understand the nuances of implementing servant leadership in diverse educational settings. Examining its effectiveness in various contexts, from urban schools to rural communities, would provide valuable insights for leaders seeking to embrace this approach.

Nevertheless, the potential benefits of servant leadership should be noticed. Educational leaders have a valuable opportunity to cultivate a collaborative environment where teachers feel empowered to make decisions, receive ongoing support, and grow professionally. By considering research-based practices and actively building relationships with their teams, leaders can pave the way for a more positive and productive learning environment for all. Therefore, we encourage all educational leaders to consider embracing servant leadership, prioritizing collaboration and growth within their schools, and joining the conversation on fostering this inspiring leadership model in action.

Contributions of Authors

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Conflict of Interests

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