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TEACHERS AS SERVANT LEADER

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Abstract
This research employed a qualitative case study design with a naturalistic and interpretive approach. Interviews were conducted with teachers, students, principal representatives, and foundation representatives at several junior high schools affiliated with a private foundation in Tangerang. The results indicate that teachers implement servant leadership characteristics, such as listening, empathy, healing, and a commitment to student growth, in daily educational interactions. There is a positive alignment between teachers' service efforts and students' perceptions, although the challenge of meeting the expectations of all students and parents still requires teachers to be adaptable. The implications of this study indicate that the success of servant leadership in schools is determined by the leadership's exemplary behavior and ongoing policy synergy.
Keywords*: Servant Leadership, Teacher, Student Mentoring, Character Education*

1. Introduction

Education plays an essential role in preparing qualified, adaptive human resources capable of responding to the disruptions of the times. As a socio-emotional process, educational success is inseparable from the quality of interpersonal relationships in the classroom, particularly between teachers and students (Arumsari, 2017; Nugraha, 2018). The quality of education is greatly influenced by the role of teachers as key actors in the learning process in schools (Hasra, Asyarah, & Azainil, 2024). In the 21st-century educational paradigm, the role of teachers has transformed; they are no longer merely transmitters of knowledge, but have evolved into facilitators, organizers, motivators, and leaders who orchestrate the development of students' full potential (Wibowo & Farnisa, 2018). This paradigm shift demands a more humanistic, collaborative, and service-oriented model of instructional leadership.

One leadership approach relevant to these demands is servant leadership. This approach focuses not on hierarchical authority, but rather on a fundamental drive to help others grow and reach their full potential (Northouse, 2016; 2021). Servant leadership focuses on cultivating, motivating, and empowering partners or students to achieve shared goals (Waruwu et al., 2021). In the educational context, teachers who adopt servant leadership tend to be more caring, empathetic, and mentor-oriented, which directly impacts student achievement, motivation, and loyalty (Nikmah, 2024; Noland & Richards, 2015). Furthermore, integrating servant leadership into teaching practices allows educators to focus more on the substance of classroom learning, minimizing instructional ineffectiveness (Drury, 2005).

Previous literature reviews on servant leadership in education still leave a crucial research gap. First, the majority of contemporary studies still focus on the principal as the primary subject of leadership (Makirimani & Naicker, 2024; Khoarane, 2023; Afjur et al., 2023; Shula, 2023). Second, studies exploring the practice of servant leadership by teachers as informal classroom leaders (teacher-as-leader) are still very limited, especially those that integrate the tripartite perspective of teachers, students, and school management. Recent studies (Dami, 2024; Athanasios, 2024; Zhang, 2023) still focus on conceptual concepts regarding student-centered learning or merely examine quantitative correlations between variables, but fail to capture the complexity and dynamics of daily teaching practices empirically and comprehensively.

Based on this research gap, this study aims to explore in-depth the implementation of servant leadership by teachers and its impact on students' learning experiences, using a case study in a school. Specifically, this research aims to: (1) describe how servant leadership characteristics are implemented by teachers and perceived by students in classroom interactions; and (2) analyzing the role of principals and supervisors in aligning these leadership practices with the institution's core

values.

Qualitative research methods are going to be adopted for this study which apart from providing some valuable theoretical findings on teacher-learner relationship in secondary school, will give educational institutions some practical tips in developing human resource development policies which will emphasize the value of service. From the perspective of educators, the result of this paper will help them be more proactive in their role as servant leaders.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Dynamics of the Teacher's Role in Contemporary Learning

Teachers as professionals are expected to educate, teach, guide, and evaluate students. Mulyasa (2013) points out in his writings, the role of a teacher is much more than a lecturer, but more of an agent of learning through an environment which challenges, motivates, and promotes the creativity of the learners. Teacher is not just a medium of knowledge delivery but a catalyst that transform student's values, attitude, and character. Anggraeni & Effane (2022) emphasize this. Teacher's dignity, as a cultural and etymological phenomenon, is shown through dedication, exemplary conduct, and pedagogical interactions, where the student's spiritual development and character growth is equally, if not more, value as the learning of knowledge (Wahyuni, 2014).

With the evolution of education that marks the 21st century, teacher's role has also become more complicated to define. It can also say according to Djamarah (2010), this is no longer confined to just being a guide of knowledge transfer but to act as facilitator, motivator and counsellor. This major change in teacher's role calls for teachers to no longer be an infallible knowledge bank but rather one who creates an atmosphere of openness and collaboration where students can develop ideas, raise questions and find the answer by themselves.

2.2 Leadership in Education and Servant Leadership

Leadership as a process wherein, an individual or a person with leadership qualities is capable of affecting change, mobilizes, guides, and inspires others to achieve or accomplish certain goals or purposes. This process involves leaders influencing, guiding, and coordinating the efforts of others individually or collectively. Leadership can either be directive or collaborative but is ultimately about effecting change through people (Northouse, 2021). In modern educational management, one of the leadership styles is value-based leadership which focuses on ethics, collaboration, and human relationships. (Chang et al., 2021). The main function of educational leaders, especially in a school, is not limited to school administrator only but also to all the teachers who are instructional leaders because they are the first point of contact for the students (Bush, 2020).

Education is one context where a servant leadership style is very appropriate type of leadership because servant-leaders focus on the follower's needs, development, and service. Drury (2005) stated so. Greenleaf who coined the term servant leadership in 1970. The ten attributes of a servant-leader are: 1) listening, 2) empathy, 3) healing, 4) awareness 5) persuasion, 0 6) conceptualization, 7) foresight, 8) stewardship, 9) commitment to the growth of others, and 10) building community (Spears, 2002). A servant leader therefore does not look to be served, but is serving those for whom he leads, and in doing so, he is a genuine, humble servant.

2.3 How Servant Leadership is Changing Schools

In the school environment, the adoption of the philosophy and spirit of servant leadership have brought about both positive personal level and organizational development. Kainde & Mandagi (2023) have empirically confirmed this. It also coincides closely with the principle of student-centered education where the foundation of interaction is integrity empathy and humility.Keith(2023; Ramiini et al (2024).

Several studies confirm the significance of this leadership:

- Towards Students. Teachers who prioritize empathy and listening are able to create positive interpersonal relationships (Pujiastutianingsih, 2023). This is directly correlated with increased intrinsic motivation, student engagement, and academic achievement (Kilag et al., 2023). Furthermore, this approach supports students' socio-emotional development and the formation of pro-social character traits (Van Dierendonck, 2011).
- Towards Teachers and School Climate. Servant leadership practices not only empower students but also improve teacher well-being, morale, and job satisfaction (Zhang et al., 2023; Makirimani & Naicker, 2024). A work environment based on genuine service fosters increased professionalism and performance (Thai'Atun et al., 2024), while also fostering an inclusive, collaborative, and trusting school culture.

2.4 Teachers as Servants

An instructor has to be the primary source of motivation and direction for students. Teaching is more than just a job; it's an essential service. Suprihatiningrum (2013) says that every teacher is a leader at the classroom level. Teacher leaders are not only the ones who give academics lessons their task also entails shaping the character and personality of students through learning (Suryana, 2017).

Through adopting servant leadership, the teacher does not use her or his power to control, but to support, follow and empower the students. The practical examples of this philosophy include a teacher who listens attentively to her students and pays attention to their personal needs. Also, a teacher who makes her classroom free from fear (Janet et al. 2014; Northouse, 2021). Based on this approach, the authors of the article examine internalization of servant leadership traits by the teachers and how it could be the cause of a major positive impact on the learning behaviour and development of the students at school. In fact, this kind of thinking is what forms the main argument of the research paper being discussed here.

3. Research Methods

The researchers conducted a case study that was naturally occurring and from which meaning was made through qualitative research. In selecting an interpretive strategy for a qualiative case study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018), the researchers were able to identify themselves very closely with the phenomenon under investigation, thus facilitating them in understanding the phenomenon in its full depth and with a naturalistic perspective. The decision to adopt an interpretive-case study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018) was informed by the research goal to look at and deeply understand a present phenomenon occurring in a limited setting. It is the implementation of service values in a number of junior high schools through a private foundation in Tangerang. This method was also one of the ways that helped the researchers to capture without distortion the daily life of the schools and through that, to have an understanding of the various practices of servant leadership by teachers and the interpretations made by students.

To gain a holistic perspective in this study, the participants were carefully identified. Informants were selected through a combination of purposive sampling and randomized selection techniques, consisting of:

- Teachers (6): Selected using purposive sampling from six junior high schools. The selection criteria were based on the highest score on the Customer Satisfaction Indicator (IKP)—an internal evaluation instrument on a scale of 1-4 that assesses teachers' personal, pedagogical, and social competencies. Teachers with the highest IKP were assumed to be the "best models" of student service practices.
- Students (6): Randomly selected from the ninth-grade student population at the same six junior high schools. The ninth-grade students were chosen because they had the longest duration of interaction (three years) with the teachers, and therefore were assumed to have comprehensive and representative experience in assessing the quality of academic and emotional service at the school.

- Principal (1): Purposively selected based on the longest tenure, with the aim of gaining in-depth historical and managerial insight into the school's organizational culture.
- School Supervisor (1): Purposively selected from the junior high and senior high school levels to provide perspective on the alignment between foundation policies and the implementation of servant leadership in the field.

As the key instrument (human instrument), the researcher collected primary data through in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted online, facilitated by the Zoom application, recorded with the participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim.

The interview guide was designed by operationalizing the ten characteristics of servant leadership (Spears, 2002) into indicators of daily behavior. The interview instrument was tailored specifically to each participant group:

1) Teacher Guide: Explores teachers' experiences of listening, empathizing, empowering students, and managing service-based classrooms.
2) Student Guide: Explores students' subjective perceptions and experiences of teacher support, care, and fairness.
3) Management Guide (Principal & Supervisor): Describes the role of structural leadership in fostering, facilitating, and aligning the institution's core values with teachers' teaching practices.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive data analysis model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014).

4. Research Findings and Discussion

4.1 Actualizing Servant Leadership Values in Pedagogical Practice

The findings indicate that teachers not only fulfill an instructional role, but also position themselves as servants who prioritize the holistic development of students. Ten characteristics of servant leadership (Spears, 2002) were observed to manifest in three domains of teachers' daily practice:

1) Interpersonal Approach and Conflict Resolution
   Teachers demonstrated the characteristics of listening, empathy, healing, and awareness through personal approaches outside of class hours. When dealing with introverted students—such as those from orphanages—teachers took proactive initiatives to approach, listen, and reflect on their own past experiences to build a bridge of empathy. This was confirmed by participant G6, who stated the importance of ensuring students' emotional well-being before offering academic support. Furthermore, in addressing behavioral issues, teachers prioritized awareness and collaboration (with guidance counselors and parents) through a persuasive, rather than punitive, approach.

2) Inclusive Instructional Strategies
   In the learning process, the characteristics of persuasion, conceptualization, and community building were implemented through collaborative classroom design. Teachers avoid favoritism by using random methods (such as the spinwheel) in forming groups, ensuring that each student has an equal opportunity. As facilitators, teachers do not dictate, but rather encourage students to explore the material in their own words. Participant G3 emphasized, "When I know what they need, I provide everything in one assignment... so everyone can explore."

3) Future Orientation and Commitment to Growth
   The characteristics of foresight, stewardship, and commitment to the growth of people are evident in teachers' dedication beyond formal work hours. Teachers actively map students' potential, recommend competitions, and mentor them. Through project-based assignments (such as analyzing successful figures), teachers

implicitly instill a future orientation (foresight) to help students plan their transition to high school/vocational school.

4.2 Student Reception of Teachers' Servant Leadership Style

The effectiveness of servant leadership depends heavily on how followers (in this case, students) perceive their leaders. Data from ninth-grade student participants indicates a very positive reception. Students feel the school environment is psychologically safe, which makes them feel free to share academic and personal issues.

Students perceive justice in educational environments. Participant S4 stated that random group work assignments are a way of stopping some students from being left out and making them feel isolated. Besides this, it shows that the teachers really want students to get ahead that the extra time and attention given to the students who are struggling outside classroom hours help them overcome the gaps in the material. In effect, the collection of various services directly affects students' learning motivation and character building, for they feel valued as subjects, rather than being mere instruments for instruction only.

4.3 Managerial Support and Internalization of Organizational Values

Teachers' servant leadership behavior is not a self-driven effort. Rather, it happens in the background with the help of an efficient organizational support system. For instance, when the leaders and supervisors get actively involved, they are able to create practices aligned with institutional values of service, honesty, discipline, caring and excellence.

The head teacher plays such a model and, rather than only instructing other teachers, they perform activities of care themselves for example taking care after a student who is sick during a school function. Moreover, when the principal leaves teachers completely free hands and full confidence in the ability of teachers to deal with student issues with compassion, trust is created.

At the structural level, the school supervisor acts as a quality catalyst through reflective evaluation instruments. Supervision is not conducted as a judgmental exercise, but rather as a space for reflective dialogue. Supervisors integrate teacher self-assessment results with the Customer Satisfaction Indicators (IKP) completed by students. PGWS participants emphasized that the teaching profession is about "selling services," which requires humility to continuously adapt to the needs of "consumers" (students). Furthermore, regular habituation programs (such as live-in and recollection) are utilized by management not only for students but also as a means for teachers to continuously hone their social sensitivity and service spirit.

4.4 General Discussion

Based on the above findings, this study confirms that servant leadership in education is not simply a principal's management style, but rather an essential pedagogical approach for teachers in the classroom. This practice shifts from an authoritative, teacher-centered paradigm to a dialogical relationship that fosters serve students.

Furthermore, these findings extend the existing literature by demonstrating that the sustainability of teacher servant leadership is highly dependent on the "chain of service" within the organization. Principals and supervisors who serve teachers will produce teachers with the emotional and professional capacity to optimally serve their students. Aligning the institution's core values, leadership role modeling, and evaluation mechanisms centered on student satisfaction has proven to be an effective formula for institutionalizing a culture of servant leadership in the school environment.

4.5 Implications

Theoretically, this research contributes to enriching the literature on educational management and leadership by filling a research gap that has dominated studies of servant leadership at the structural leadership level (principals). This study broadens the discourse by

positioning teachers as informal leaders in the classroom (teacher-as-leader), where servant leadership is viewed not solely as a management style, but as a core pedagogical approach that humanizes students. Furthermore, the findings related to the "chain of service" provide a new perspective that servant leadership in educational institutions is an interdependent, ecosystemic construct extending from the foundation/supervisory level down to the students, not simply an individual leadership competency.

Practically, these findings provide strategic implications for school management and educational foundations to design teacher continuing professional development (CPD) programs that focus not only on pedagogical-cognitive competencies but also on fostering affective and socio-emotional intelligence based on service values. School policymakers are encouraged to maintain and expand student-centered evaluation instruments—such as the Customer Satisfaction Indicator (CSI)—and adopt a non-judgmental, dialogic supervision model to safeguard teachers' psychological well-being. For educators in general, this research can serve as a critical reflection tool for consciously building classrooms that are equitable, inclusive, and free from favoritism.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the ten characteristics of servant leadership are manifested through an empathetic interpersonal approach, inclusive and collaborative classroom instructional strategies, and future-oriented mentoring for students. This approach positively impacts student engagement, who feel psychologically safe, valued, and motivated to learn. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that the success of servant leadership in the classroom is highly dependent on the presence of a "chain of service" within the school ecosystem. Teachers' service practices are strongly supported by managerial support through role modeling by the principal and reflective supervision and evaluation mechanisms from the school supervisor.

This study has limitations due to its focus on a qualitative case study within a single institutional environment with an established organizational culture. Therefore, further research is recommended to conduct longitudinal studies to measure the long-term impact of teacher servant leadership on substantive academic achievement and the development of students' prosocial character, all the way to higher education. In addition, further researchers can develop quantitative or mixed-methods research designs by creating servant leadership metric measurement instruments specifically for the context of teacher-student relations, and testing them on public school populations and institutions with more heterogeneous demographic and cultural backgrounds.

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