



Collaborative Culture: The Power of Servant Leadership in Schools

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Renith S. Guanzon, LPT, PhD (EdM), PhD (ScEd-Math)

SGS PhD Program Head, STI West Negros University, Bacolod City, Philippines

Gamaliel A. Longa

Library Automation Technologist, King Abdulaziz Medical City, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Joinville M. Omay, MEd, LPT

Master Teacher I, Sibalom National High School, Sibalom, Antique, Philippines

Maricel O. Doromal, PhD.

Teacher III, Education and Training Center School, DepEd-Bacolod City

April Joy V. Casuyon, MAEd

Primary Teacher at Chokchai Krabi School, Thailand

Maria Christina F. Bagundol, LPT, PhD

Faculty, STI West Negros University

Richelle F. Negosa, LPT

Teacher 1, Department of Education - Bacolod

Abstract:

This research investigates the significant influence of servant leadership on fostering a positive school climate by delving into the lived experiences of teachers and school leaders. Employing a phenomenological approach, the study seeks to uncover the ways in which servant leadership not only enhances student academic achievement but also increases teacher job satisfaction and cultivates a collaborative school culture. The findings demonstrate that servant leadership plays a pivotal role in creating a sense of belonging and engagement among stakeholders, leading to enhanced personal growth and professional development. Participants in the study reported that when school leaders prioritize the needs of their staff and students, it fosters a supportive and inclusive environment. This nurturing atmosphere encourages collaboration, empowering educators to work together towards common goals, ultimately benefiting student outcomes. Additionally, the positive impact of servant leadership on teacher morale and well-being is evident, as teachers who feel valued are more motivated to perform at their best. Overall, this research highlights that implementing servant leadership practices is essential for improving school performance and well-being, positioning it as a valuable framework for educational institutions striving for excellence and a positive school culture.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Teacher Job Satisfaction, Student Academic Achievement, Collaborative Culture, Educational Leadership

Introduction:

The concept of leadership has long been recognized as a crucial element in shaping the organizational culture and climate of schools. Effective leadership establishes a positive school climate, which is essential for the holistic development of students, teachers, and the broader school community. A healthy school climate fosters a sense of safety, belonging, and motivation, resulting in better academic outcomes and stronger community involvement (Berkowitz et al., 2017). In contrast, schools plagued by a negative climate often experience challenges such as absenteeism, student dropouts, teacher burnout, and staff turnover, hampering the school's progress and stability (Fatou & Kubiszewski, 2018).

In recent years, servant leadership has emerged as a compelling model in educational settings. Unlike traditional hierarchical leadership, servant leadership emphasizes prioritizing the needs and growth of followers over the self-interest of leaders (Bavik et al., 2017).

This leadership style is grounded in principles such as empathy, stewardship, and building community, making it particularly relevant in school environments that thrive on collaboration and interpersonal connections (Chen et al., 2013). Leaders who adopt this approach empower their stakeholders, promoting a culture where both teachers and students flourish.

Empirical studies suggest that schools led by servant leaders often report higher levels of teacher job satisfaction, improved student outcomes, and enhanced school culture (Cerit, 2009). By fostering trust and open communication,



servant leaders create environments that encourage innovation, emotional well-being, and professional growth among educators.

Furthermore, these leaders contribute to building resilient learning communities where students feel supported and are motivated to achieve academic success. Despite the growing body of literature on servant leadership, there is still limited understanding of how this leadership style is experienced by those who practice it daily. Exploring the lived experiences of school leaders and teachers who embody servant leadership offers valuable insights into how these practices shape school dynamics and foster a positive climate. Such an inquiry is essential to bridge the gap between theory and practice, revealing the personal and professional challenges faced by leaders as they implement this approach.

This study aims to investigate the experiences of school leaders and teachers practicing servant leadership, focusing on how their actions influence school climate. Specifically, it will examine how servant leadership impacts teacher satisfaction, student academic performance, and overall school culture.

Literature Review:

This study is anchored in Robert Greenleaf's (1970) concept of *servant leadership*, which emphasizes the leader's primary role as a servant to others. This model shifts the traditional top-down leadership structure by prioritizing the needs of followers—whether individuals or communities—over personal ambition or authority.

Greenleaf outlined several essential characteristics of servant leadership, including listening, empathy, awareness, stewardship, and a commitment to the growth of people and institutions (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). These traits position leaders as facilitators who nurture the well-being and development of those they serve.

In an educational setting, servant leadership aligns with practices that empower both teachers and students by fostering a sense of belonging, shared responsibility, and collaboration (Mayer et al., 2008). Rather than focusing solely on academic outcomes or operational efficiency, servant leaders emphasize building meaningful relationships within the school community. By valuing teachers' professional growth and students' holistic development, they create an environment that encourages trust, motivation, and engagement.

This, in turn, cultivates a collaborative school culture where everyone's contributions are acknowledged and valued. The impact of servant leadership on teachers and students has been well-documented. Research demonstrates that schools led by servant leaders tend to experience higher levels of teacher job satisfaction and morale, which can lead to better retention rates and reduced burnout (Jackson, 2010). Teachers working under servant leaders often feel empowered to innovate in their teaching strategies, confident in the knowledge that their growth is prioritized. This leadership style also promotes a positive emotional climate, where teachers feel supported both professionally and personally.

In addition to improving teacher well-being, servant leadership has been shown to influence student outcomes positively. Schools that practice this leadership model often report higher levels of academic performance, as students benefit from a nurturing and supportive learning environment (Drury, 2004).

The relational focus of servant leadership ensures that students are not only academically equipped but also emotionally and socially prepared to thrive, fostering personal growth alongside intellectual development. Servant leadership also enhances the overall school culture by promoting shared values and collective goals.

Leaders who practice this model serve as role models for collaboration, accountability, and ethical behavior, thereby setting a standard that permeates all levels of the school. This inclusive and community-centered approach strengthens relationships among all stakeholders—teachers, students, parents, and administrators—creating a resilient learning community focused on continuous improvement. Grounding this study in servant leadership theory provides a lens for understanding how leadership practices influence school climate, teacher satisfaction, and student outcomes. Exploring the lived experiences of school leaders and teachers who embody servant leadership will offer insights into how these principles manifest in practice. By examining the intersection of servant leadership with school dynamics, the study seeks to contribute to the growing discourse on leadership models that promote sustainable educational success.

Methodology:

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of school leaders and teachers engaged in servant leadership. By focusing on participants' subjective experiences, the research aimed to understand how these experiences shape their perceptions of the influence of servant leadership on school climate.



The participants included ten school leaders and fifteen teachers from public schools within a district recognized for its commitment to servant leadership practices. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select individuals with direct experience in implementing servant leadership.

Data collection involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews that sought to capture the participants' experiences, challenges, and perceptions related to servant leadership. Sample interview questions included inquiries about how participants practice servant leadership in their school settings, the perceived impact of servant leadership on school climate, and specific situations where servant leadership led to improvements in student or teacher performance. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted both in person and via online platforms. With participants' consent, all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed to ensure accuracy.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed, following Moustakas's (1994) approach to phenomenological analysis. This process involved several key steps: first, bracketing, which entailed setting aside personal biases to focus on the participants' experiences; second, coding, where recurring themes from the interview data were identified; third, clustering themes, which involved grouping related themes to form overarching categories; and finally, essence extraction, which summarized the essential meaning of the participants' lived experiences.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study, with ethical clearance obtained from the Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were guaranteed confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage of the research. To further protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used in the reporting of findings.

Findings:

Fostering Belonging and Engagement

Participants in the study emphasized how servant leadership fostered a sense of belonging and engagement among teachers and students. School leaders practicing this model demonstrated empathy, active listening, and responsiveness to the needs of their staff, creating a supportive and inclusive school environment (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006).

This leadership style promotes not only organizational harmony but also individual commitment, as stakeholders feel heard and valued. One teacher highlighted, "Our principal listens to us and makes sure we have what we need. It makes me feel valued and motivates me to give my best."

The empowerment fostered by servant leadership is a critical factor in enhancing teacher engagement and job satisfaction. Research indicates that teachers who feel empowered are more committed to their roles and motivated to contribute meaningfully to the school community (Cerit, 2009). By prioritizing the needs of teachers, servant leaders create conditions where educators feel trusted to innovate in their teaching practices, fostering a deeper connection to their work and enhancing professional satisfaction (Chen et al., 2013).

Servant leadership also plays a crucial role in strengthening school culture by promoting collaboration and shared responsibility. According to Bavik et al. (2017), servant leaders encourage job crafting and citizenship behaviors among employees, which further increases engagement.

In schools, this translates to collaborative relationships between teachers and administrators, where both parties actively contribute to the school's goals and development. The sense of unity and mutual respect cultivated by servant leadership creates a positive climate that benefits the entire school community (Mayer et al., 2008).

Moreover, a positive school climate is essential for student engagement and performance. Research suggests that the supportive environment established by servant leaders reduces absenteeism and increases student motivation and participation (Fatou & Kubiszewski, 2018). Berkowitz et al. (2017) highlight that a school climate rooted in equity, trust, and emotional support directly correlates with improved academic outcomes. Through their compassionate approach, servant leaders model behaviors that encourage students to take ownership of their learning and foster a strong connection to their school community.

Servant leadership offers a sustainable model for promoting both individual well-being and organizational success within educational settings. The findings of this study align with previous research indicating that servant leadership enhances job satisfaction, engagement, and academic performance (Schwarz et al., 2016; Cerit, 2009). By creating an environment where teachers and students feel empowered, valued, and connected, servant leadership fosters a culture of continuous improvement and well-being. This framework not only strengthens relationships among stakeholders but also promotes sustainable growth, ensuring long-term educational success.

Enhancing Collaboration and School Culture



A recurring theme among participants was the role of servant leadership in fostering collaboration within schools. School leaders emphasized that servant leadership promotes an environment where teachers work cohesively toward shared objectives. By prioritizing the needs of staff over personal authority, leaders cultivate a sense of mutual trust, leading to stronger teamwork.

One school head shared, "When I put my team's needs first, they collaborate more openly, and it reflects in our students' behavior and performance." This leadership approach aligns with Barbuto and Wheeler's (2006) concept of stewardship, which encourages leaders to serve the organization by enabling others to succeed. Collaboration thrives when leaders model empathy, trust, and respect. Servant leadership creates a space where teachers feel empowered to express ideas without fear of judgment, facilitating open dialogue and innovation (Mayer et al., 2008).

Teachers are more inclined to cooperate when they see that their leaders value their input and prioritize the collective well-being of the team. This collaborative culture nurtures job satisfaction and a shared sense of responsibility, encouraging teachers to go beyond individual achievements and contribute to the school's overall success (Bavik et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the collaborative environment established through servant leadership directly impacts student outcomes. Research by Cerit (2009) found that when teachers experience high levels of collaboration, they are more engaged in their teaching practices, which positively influences student engagement and academic performance. School leaders reported that as collaboration among teachers improved, students mirrored this behavior by working more effectively with their peers. The cooperative spirit in the classroom created by servant-led teachers fosters social development and teamwork among students, aligning with studies showing that positive school climates enhance student motivation (Berkowitz et al., 2017).

Effective collaboration also requires shared leadership and decision-making, which are hallmarks of servant leadership. Participants noted that their leaders frequently involved teachers in developing strategies, creating lesson plans, and evaluating school programs.

This inclusive approach promotes a sense of ownership among teachers, strengthening their commitment to the school's vision and objectives. Kiersch and Peters (2017) emphasize that authentic collaboration results when followers feel they have a voice in decision-making processes, further motivating them to work toward common goals.

The benefits of collaboration extend beyond academic outcomes, enhancing the school community as a whole. Schools practicing servant leadership reported a greater sense of belonging, with teachers, students, and parents working together toward shared objectives. Fatou and Kubiszewski (2018) note that schools with collaborative cultures experience fewer disciplinary issues, as students feel more connected and supported. Additionally, servant leadership's emphasis on shared goals helps reduce staff turnover by fostering a positive work environment, where teachers feel part of a larger purpose (Schwarz et al., 2016).

Servant leadership serves as a powerful catalyst for fostering collaboration in educational settings. By prioritizing the needs of staff and promoting shared decision-making, school leaders create an environment where teamwork flourishes.

This collaborative culture not only enhances teacher engagement and student performance but also strengthens relationships within the school community. As teachers and students experience the benefits of working toward common goals, they contribute to creating a positive and sustainable school climate that promotes long-term growth and development.

Impact on Academic Performance and Teacher Satisfaction

Participants emphasized that servant leadership positively influenced academic performance by fostering a supportive environment for both teachers and students. Teachers explained that when they felt valued by their school leaders, it enhanced their motivation and job satisfaction, ultimately benefiting students.

As one teacher shared, "When I am valued, it trickles down to my students—because I have the energy to teach well, they perform better academically." This aligns with Barbuto and Wheeler's (2006) notion that servant leaders empower others, creating a ripple effect that improves overall organizational outcomes.

The connection between teacher well-being and student performance highlights the importance of nurturing a positive work environment. Research supports the idea that satisfied teachers are more engaged in their instructional practices, leading to better academic outcomes (Cerit, 2009). When teachers experience higher job satisfaction



through servant leadership practices, such as empathy and active support, they are more likely to invest time and effort in creating effective learning experiences for students (Bavik et al., 2017).

Furthermore, participants noted that servant leadership practices contributed to students' sense of security and motivation. When teachers feel supported and empowered, they model positive behaviors that influence their students.

Berkowitz et al. (2017) suggest that students perform better in environments where they feel emotionally supported, and this emotional climate is closely tied to how teachers perceive their own well-being. Thus, the leadership style that prioritizes teacher satisfaction indirectly strengthens students' academic engagement and motivation.

The positive academic outcomes also extend to classroom management. Teachers reported that students became more cooperative and engaged when they sensed their teachers were energized and committed. Research by Mayer et al. (2008) emphasizes that the emotional state of teachers significantly affects how students behave and perform. A supportive school climate fostered through servant leadership reduces burnout, ensuring that teachers remain consistent in delivering quality instruction, which in turn promotes better academic performance.

Servant leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing academic achievement by improving teacher well-being and creating supportive learning environments. When teachers feel empowered and valued, they pass on this positive energy to their students, leading to improved academic outcomes and student engagement. The findings reinforce that leadership practices focusing on empathy, empowerment, and shared well-being are instrumental not only in promoting teacher satisfaction but also in ensuring sustainable academic success.

Challenges and Support Systems

Participants emphasized that the successful implementation of servant leadership relies heavily on consistent support and ongoing professional development. Servant leadership, by its nature, requires leaders to prioritize the needs of others, but maintaining this approach can be challenging without reinforcement. As one principal noted, "Without organizational support, it's hard to sustain servant leadership. We need continuous development and reinforcement from the system." This statement reflects the need for structured programs and policies that nurture servant leadership practices within schools.

Organizational backing is essential for creating an environment where servant leadership can flourish. Teachers and school leaders pointed out that support from the education system, such as leadership training and peer coaching, plays a crucial role in maintaining this leadership style. Bavik et al. (2017) argue that without proper institutional frameworks, leadership models focused on service and collaboration may struggle to gain traction. Therefore, regular workshops, mentoring programs, and reflective practices are necessary to align servant leadership principles with everyday school operations.

Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of reinforcing servant leadership through feedback and recognition. Leaders who receive constructive feedback on their performance are more likely to remain committed to this leadership style.

As Lambert (2004) suggests, reinforcement from both supervisors and peers strengthens a leader's capacity to prioritize others' needs. Regular evaluation and acknowledgment of servant leadership practices not only ensure their sustainability but also create a culture where these values are celebrated and shared.

Institutional policies that prioritize servant leadership can also foster consistency. Teachers mentioned that servant leadership is most effective when it is embedded into school policies and practices rather than relying solely on individual leadership styles.

Berkowitz et al. (2017) emphasize that systemic reinforcement, such as through leadership standards and strategic planning, creates an environment where collaboration and empowerment become second nature within the organization. This consistency ensures that servant leadership practices can withstand leadership transitions or changes in school administration.

The sustainability of servant leadership depends on continuous training, systemic reinforcement, and institutional support. Participants stressed the need for professional development programs, feedback mechanisms, and policy alignment to embed servant leadership within the school culture. Without these elements, the implementation of servant leadership may falter, limiting its long-term impact on teacher engagement, student outcomes, and overall school success. Thus, sustained servant leadership requires more than individual effort—it demands a collective commitment from the entire educational system.

Discussion:



The findings of this study corroborate existing research that highlights the positive impact of servant leadership on school climate, teacher job satisfaction, and student achievement (Cerit, 2009; Drury, 2004).

Participants consistently emphasized that servant leadership fosters a sense of belonging, engagement, and collaboration, all of which contribute to creating a supportive and inclusive environment. This positive climate aligns with the frameworks of Berkowitz et al. (2017), who stress that a healthy school environment encourages both personal and academic growth.

In particular, teachers shared that servant leadership improves their motivation and commitment to their roles, which in turn enhances student performance. A recurring sentiment among participants was that when leaders prioritize teachers' well-being, it "trickles down" to students, ultimately benefiting their academic outcomes.

This aligns with the work of Schwarz et al. (2016), who found that when leaders focus on meeting the needs of employees, they cultivate a sense of purpose and satisfaction that encourages teachers to deliver high-quality instruction. Furthermore, the emphasis on empowerment resonates with research by Mayer et al. (2008), which suggests that servant leadership satisfies essential psychological needs, such as autonomy and competence, driving teachers to perform more effectively.

This study also underscores the importance of collaboration as a key element fostered by servant leadership. Participants noted that servant leaders create environments where teachers feel empowered to work together toward common goals.

As one school head stated, "When I put my team's needs first, they collaborate more openly, and it reflects in our students' behavior and performance." This finding mirrors the research by Bavik et al. (2017), which suggests that servant leadership encourages cooperation through job crafting and increased teacher engagement, ultimately enhancing the overall school culture. Additionally, Fatou and Kubiszewski (2018) emphasize that collaborative environments reduce stress and absenteeism, which are critical for maintaining effective teaching practices.

A significant theme that emerged from the participants' experiences was the need for ongoing support and training to sustain servant leadership practices. As participants indicated, servant leadership is not merely an innate quality but a continuous process that requires intentional development.

This finding is consistent with research by Thao and Kang (2018), who highlight that servant leadership thrives when reinforced through professional development and feedback mechanisms. Regular leadership training ensures that leaders are equipped with the necessary skills to maintain the servant-leader mindset, even when faced with challenges. Without such development, there is a risk of leadership fatigue or a return to traditional top-down management approaches.

Organizational support also plays a crucial role in embedding servant leadership within the school system. Participants emphasized that without systemic backing, servant leadership may be difficult to sustain. This insight aligns with the work of Lambert (2004), who found that servant leadership is most effective when institutional policies actively support collaboration, empowerment, and shared decision-making.

Schools that adopt servant leadership as part of their core values are more likely to develop consistent practices that endure leadership transitions. Policy alignment and strategic planning, as suggested by Berkowitz et al. (2017), are critical in reinforcing servant leadership principles and ensuring that they become embedded in the school's culture over time.

The findings of this study illustrate the multifaceted benefits of servant leadership in educational settings. Servant leadership fosters a positive school climate by promoting teacher satisfaction, collaboration, and student achievement. However, the successful implementation of this leadership style requires more than individual effort—it demands continuous training and organizational support.

These insights contribute to the growing body of literature that underscores the need for intentional and systemic efforts to integrate servant leadership into school leadership frameworks. Future research could explore how servant leadership can be scaled across different educational contexts or how it interacts with other leadership styles to further enhance school outcomes. Ultimately, this study reaffirms that servant leadership is not just a leadership approach but a transformative practice that has the potential to improve both teaching and learning experiences in meaningful ways.

Conclusion:

This phenomenological study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of school leaders and teachers who practice servant leadership. By capturing their perspectives, the research highlights how servant leadership fosters a positive school climate characterized by increased engagement, collaboration, and academic achievement.



Participants consistently reported that when leaders prioritize the needs of their staff, it creates an environment conducive to personal and professional growth.

The findings indicate that adopting servant leadership practices can significantly enhance school performance and culture. By empowering teachers and encouraging collaborative efforts, schools can build a supportive atmosphere where both educators and students thrive.

This approach not only improves job satisfaction among teachers but also positively impacts student outcomes, reinforcing the notion that leadership styles directly influence the overall educational experience.

In light of these insights, it is evident that schools seeking to enhance their performance and culture should consider integrating servant leadership principles into their leadership frameworks.

Implementing these practices can lead to a more inclusive and productive environment, ultimately benefiting all stakeholders involved. As educational institutions navigate the complexities of modern challenges, embracing servant leadership may be a key strategy for fostering a thriving school community.

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