

Teachers' Perceptions and the Implementation of Servant Leadership by School Principals to Enhance Teacher Performance: A Qualitative Study in Indonesian Public Senior High Schools

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Article History: Received on September 2025, Revised on November 2025, Published on Desember 2025

Abstract

Servant leadership plays a crucial role in education, particularly in schools, as it fosters a positive, collaborative, and supportive environment that enhances teachers' motivation and commitment, improves the quality of teaching and learning, and ultimately contributes to better student learning outcomes. This study aims to examine two main aspects: (1) teachers' perceptions of servant leadership practices and (2) the implementation of the servant leadership model by school principals to improve teacher performance in public senior high schools in South Lampung Regency, Indonesia. This study employed a qualitative research approach. The research was conducted in public senior high schools in South Lampung Regency, and data were collected through interviews and classroom observations. The findings reveal that teachers hold positive perceptions of the servant leadership model. They perceive school principals who demonstrate servant leadership as possessing strong listening skills, empathy, openness, and the ability to foster a sense of community within the school. Furthermore, the implementation of servant leadership in public senior high schools in South Lampung Regency is reflected in the creation of a supportive and motivating learning environment, the empowerment of teachers' professional potential, and the principals' commitment to understanding and responding to teachers' aspirations. Servant leadership has gained increasing recognition in the field of education due to its emphasis on serving others, personal growth, and the professional development of educators. Furthermore, the principles of servant leadership are consistent with Islamic teachings, as reflected in the Holy Qur'an, including Surah Ash-Shu'ara (26:215) and Surah Ali 'Imran (3:159), and exemplified through the leadership of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Keywords: *Servant leadership, School principal, teacher performance, teachers' perceptions*

A. Introduction

Education is a fundamental pillar of national development, and improving educational quality requires effective school leadership and competent teachers. Teachers play a central role in determining the success of classroom learning, while school principals are responsible for creating conditions that enable teachers to perform effectively. Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that the leadership style of school principals significantly influences teachers' motivation, professional commitment, instructional quality, and overall school effectiveness (Rivayanti et al., 2020; Pala'langan, 2021). Consequently, effective school leadership has become one of the most important determinants of educational quality.

The rapid transformation of education in the digital era has increased the complexity of school leadership. Today's school principals are expected to possess not only managerial competence but also interpersonal and transformational leadership skills that encourage collaboration, innovation, and continuous professional growth among teachers. Leadership approaches that rely solely on authority and hierarchical control often discourage teacher initiative, reduce professional autonomy, and limit opportunities for innovation (Tahir, 2021; Wijayanti, 2017). As a result, teachers may become passive in carrying out their responsibilities and depend heavily on instructions from school leaders rather than demonstrating creativity and professional judgment.

Every teacher possesses unique potential that can be developed through supportive leadership. School principals are therefore expected to create an environment that empowers teachers, recognizes their professional contributions, and encourages continuous learning. Empowering teachers not only improves their professional competence but also strengthens their motivation, commitment, and instructional performance (Nathaniel, 2022; Santoso & Hidayat, 2022). In Indonesian public senior high schools, teachers increasingly expect school principals to understand their professional needs, listen to their aspirations, and support their career development. Such leadership practices contribute directly to improving teacher performance and educational outcomes (Kholidah et al., 2023).

Among various leadership approaches, servant leadership has gained increasing attention in educational settings because it emphasizes serving others before exercising authority. Originally introduced by Greenleaf and further developed by Spears, servant leadership focuses on listening, empathy, stewardship, persuasion, commitment to individual growth, and community building (Northouse, 2016). Unlike traditional authoritarian leadership, servant leaders prioritize the personal and professional development of their followers while fostering trust, collaboration, and shared responsibility. Dennis (2004) further conceptualized servant leadership through dimensions including love, empowerment, vision, humility, and trust, which have been widely adopted in educational leadership research.

Previous studies have reported positive relationships between servant leadership and teacher motivation, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and school effectiveness. Nevertheless, empirical evidence regarding teachers' perceptions of servant leadership and its implementation by school principals in Indonesian public senior high schools remains relatively limited, particularly within the context of South Lampung Regency. Most existing studies emphasize quantitative relationships between leadership and organizational outcomes, while fewer studies explore teachers' lived experiences and perceptions using qualitative approaches. This gap highlights the need for a deeper understanding of how servant leadership is practiced in schools and how it contributes to improving teacher performance.

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore teachers' perceptions of servant leadership and examine how school principals implement servant leadership practices to enhance teacher performance in public senior high schools in South Lampung Regency, Indonesia. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) How do teachers perceive servant leadership practices implemented by school principals? and (2) How is the servant leadership model implemented by school principals to improve teacher performance? The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on educational leadership while providing practical insights for school principals seeking to strengthen teacher performance through servant leadership.

B. Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore teachers' perceptions of servant leadership and examine how school principals implement servant leadership practices to enhance teacher performance. The study was conducted in public senior high schools in South Lampung Regency, Indonesia. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of leadership practices within their natural educational settings (Ibrahim & Buchori, 2023).

Participants

The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research objectives. A total of nine participants were involved, comprising one school principal and eight teachers selected from a population of 84 school personnel. The participants were chosen because they possessed sufficient knowledge and experience regarding school leadership and teacher performance, allowing them to provide rich and meaningful information related to the research topic (Ibrahim & Buchori, 2023).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations. The interview protocol was developed based on the indicators of servant leadership and teacher performance, particularly those related to teachers' responsibility and work motivation. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to explore emerging issues by asking follow-up questions while maintaining consistency with the research objectives (Maunah, 2016; Gultom, 2020).

Each interview was conducted face-to-face with the participants in their respective schools. Prior to the interviews, the researchers prepared observation guidelines, interview protocols, field notes, and open-ended questions. During the fieldwork, direct observations were conducted to examine participants' activities, interactions, and behaviors within the school environment. The researchers documented contextual information and field conditions to complement and strengthen the interview findings (Yuniarti et al., 2022; Rohman, 2019). The integration of interview and observation data enhanced the credibility of the findings through data triangulation.

The scope of this study was limited to examining the implementation of servant leadership by school principals and its contribution to improving teacher performance, with particular emphasis on teachers' responsibility and work motivation.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis techniques. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and subsequently subjected to data reduction by identifying meaningful statements relevant to the research objectives while eliminating redundant or irrelevant information. This process enabled the researchers to organize, simplify, and interpret the raw data into coherent categories and themes (Umrati & Wijaya, 2020; Armiyanti et al., 2023).

The analysis involved three interconnected stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, significant information was coded and categorized according to the dimensions of servant leadership and teacher performance. The categorized data were then organized into thematic displays to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying recurring patterns, relationships, and meanings across participants' responses, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected the participants' experiences and perceptions.

C. Results and Discussion

Results and Discussion

Teachers' Perceptions of Servant Leadership

The findings indicate that teachers generally hold positive perceptions of servant leadership as practiced by school principals in public senior high schools in South Lampung Regency. Based on interview and observational data, six major themes emerged that characterize servant leadership in the school context: (1) active listening, (2) empathy, (3) openness, (4) community building, (5) serving before being served, and (6) leading by example.

Active Listening

Teachers perceived active listening as one of the most important characteristics of servant leadership. Participants explained that school principals listened attentively to teachers' concerns without interrupting and demonstrated genuine interest in understanding their perspectives. One participant stated:

"A servant leader is a principal who makes teachers feel comfortable when expressing their opinions." (Teacher 1, September 14, 2023)

Another teacher emphasized:

"A servant leader always listens carefully to subordinates without interrupting them." (Teacher 2, September 13, 2023)

These perceptions were consistent with classroom and school observations, which showed that principals regularly listened to teachers' concerns regarding instructional activities, administrative issues, and personal matters. These findings support Spears' (2002) assertion that listening is a fundamental characteristic of servant leadership.

Empathy

Empathy emerged as another prominent dimension of servant leadership. Teachers described servant leaders as principals who understood their personal and professional circumstances and demonstrated genuine concern for their well-being.

One participant explained:

"A good principal is someone who cares about teachers' conditions and always provides support whenever teachers experience difficulties." (Teacher 3, September 14, 2023)

Observational data further confirmed that principals regularly contacted teachers or administrative staff who were absent due to illness and offered appropriate assistance. Such practices strengthened interpersonal relationships and increased teachers' sense of appreciation within the school community.

Openness

Teachers also emphasized the importance of openness in school leadership. Participants reported that school principals encouraged discussion, accepted constructive criticism, and involved teachers in decision-making processes.

As one participant stated:

“A servant leader is willing to accept suggestions, values teachers’ opinions, and considers teachers as partners in discussion.” (Teacher 4, September 13, 2023)

School observations revealed that important school policies were commonly discussed during staff meetings before decisions were finalized. This participatory leadership style promoted mutual trust and collective responsibility.

Community Building

Another important finding concerns the principal’s commitment to developing teachers’ professional potential. Teachers reported receiving opportunities to participate in school management, professional development activities, and collaborative teams according to their expertise.

One participant explained:

“Servant leadership provides teachers with opportunities to demonstrate their full potential.” (Teacher 1, September 14, 2023)

These findings suggest that principals actively invested in teacher development by delegating responsibilities, encouraging collaboration, and establishing professional learning communities.

Serving Before Being Served

Participants consistently described servant leaders as individuals who prioritized serving teachers, students, and school staff before expecting service from others. Teachers perceived that school principals focused on fulfilling educational and administrative needs to support effective teaching and learning.

This finding reinforces Greenleaf’s principle that leadership begins with a genuine desire to serve others before exercising authority.

Leading by Example

Teachers also highlighted the importance of exemplary leadership. School principals were perceived as role models who demonstrated discipline, integrity, commitment, and professionalism through their daily actions rather than relying solely on formal authority.

Observations showed that principals consistently arrived early at school, participated in religious activities, attended school events, and actively engaged in collaborative

activities with teachers and students. Such behaviors strengthened teachers' respect and willingness to emulate positive leadership practices.

The Implementation of Servant Leadership in Improving Teacher Performance

Interview and observation data indicate that servant leadership contributed to teacher performance in three principal ways.

Creating a Supportive and Motivating Work Environment

School principals cultivated a positive organizational climate in which teachers felt respected, supported, and professionally valued. This supportive environment enhanced teachers' job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and motivation to improve instructional quality.

Empowering Teachers' Professional Potential

Servant leadership encouraged teacher empowerment through the delegation of responsibilities based on individual competencies and professional expertise. The principal emphasized that teamwork and empowerment were essential strategies for improving school performance.

One participant noted:

"School principals should assign additional responsibilities according to each teacher's expertise." (Teacher 4, September 13, 2023)

Such empowerment enabled teachers to contribute more actively to school development while strengthening their professional confidence and leadership capacity.

Understanding and Responding to Teachers' Aspirations

Teachers emphasized that principals who listened carefully to their aspirations created stronger trust and encouraged greater participation in achieving school goals. Open communication facilitated collaboration, knowledge sharing, and continuous improvement of teaching practices.

Teacher performance was also monitored through regular semester performance reports, including attendance, instructional implementation, participation in school activities, and professional responsibilities. These monitoring mechanisms were implemented not as instruments of control but as part of continuous professional development.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that teachers perceive servant leadership as an effective leadership approach for improving teacher performance. Although Spears (2002) proposed ten characteristics of servant leadership, teachers in this study consistently emphasized six dominant dimensions listening, empathy, openness, community

building, serving others, and leading by example as the most influential characteristics within the school context.

These findings are consistent with previous studies reporting that servant leadership strengthens teacher motivation, organizational commitment, collaboration, and professional performance (Peranguwu, 2021; Randy, 2022). By prioritizing teachers' needs, empowering their professional growth, and fostering collaborative relationships, school principals create a positive organizational culture that supports continuous school improvement.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that servant leadership aligns closely with Islamic leadership principles. The values of humility, compassion, consultation (*shura*), and service reflected in the Holy Qur'an, particularly Surah Ash-Shu'ara (26:215) and Surah Ali 'Imran (3:159), reinforce the ethical foundation of servant leadership. These principles were exemplified by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), whose leadership emphasized mercy, consultation, and service to others. Consequently, servant leadership represents not only an effective educational leadership model but also a leadership philosophy consistent with Islamic values and contemporary educational management.

D. Conclusions

This study concludes that teachers in public senior high schools in South Lampung Regency perceive servant leadership as an effective leadership approach characterized by active listening, empathy, openness, community building, serving others before being served, and leading by example. These characteristics foster positive relationships between school principals and teachers, creating an organizational climate that supports collaboration, trust, and professional growth. The findings further demonstrate that servant leadership contributes to improving teacher performance through three key practices: creating a supportive and motivating work environment, empowering teachers according to their professional competencies, and understanding and responding to teachers' aspirations. These leadership practices encourage greater teacher engagement, strengthen professional commitment, and promote continuous improvement in teaching quality. Overall, servant leadership represents a relevant and effective model for educational leadership in Indonesian public senior high schools. By prioritizing service, empowerment, and collaborative decision-making, school principals can enhance teacher performance and contribute to sustainable school improvement. Future research is recommended to examine the implementation of servant leadership in different educational contexts using larger samples and mixed-method or quantitative approaches to further validate and extend the findings of this study.

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