

The Impact of Servant Leadership Behaviours on Secondary School Students' Academic Achievement in Tanzania

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of servant leadership on students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in the Mpanda Municipal Council, Tanzania. The study assessed the prevalence of servant leadership behaviours and their relationship with teacher empowerment and student performance. Using a quantitative approach and a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 187 participants and analysed through descriptive statistics and linear regression using IBM-SPSS. The null hypothesis that servant leadership behaviours are rarely practised in public secondary schools was rejected, confirming the presence of such leadership practices. The study concludes that servant leadership is evident, as school heads consistently prioritise their subordinates when addressing school-related matters. The study recommends that school heads proactively address their subordinates' needs to cultivate a culture of self-giving among teachers, which, in turn, can contribute to improved student achievement.

Keywords: *Servant leadership, emotional healing, head of school, leadership style*

Introduction

Leadership is a crucial element in any organisation involving human interaction, as it serves as a catalyst for change and a unifying force among employees through the power of influence (Ibrahim & Don, 2014; Wong, 2007). In business or humanitarian activities, centralised or dispersed organisations require supportive and selfless leadership to achieve success (Leadership, 2019). This form of leadership fosters positive behavioural changes in employees, enhancing their commitment to organisational goals (Gocen & Sen, 2021). As a result, organisational development becomes a key performance measure, directly influencing goal achievement. It has been argued that when, employees are motivated to put in extra effort without prioritizing personal gain, overall productivity increases, making student

academic achievement more attainable in educational settings (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2000).

Studies on leadership styles has gained momentum since the 1970s, driven by the growing recognition of employees' contributions as a vital organizational resource (Eva *et al.*, 2019). Researchers emphasize that prioritizing employees' needs is crucial in determining the effectiveness of both production and service-oriented organizations (Gocen & Sen, 2021). Leadership selection presents a unique challenge in the education sector, as different leadership styles serve diverse interests (Sağlam & Alpaydın, 2017). Schools, as organisations, benefit more from leaders who adopt a serving mindset rather than those motivated by personal gain, as this approach enhances their effectiveness in fulfilling their roles within the community (Sağlam & Alpaydın, 2017).

Servant leadership is increasingly favoured over traditional management due to its focus on social influence, encouraging individuals to pursue what is meaningful and beneficial (Sağlam & Alpaydın, 2017). This leadership style takes a holistic approach, engaging followers on multiple levels: relational, ethical, emotional, and spiritual, empowering them to grow and reach their full potential (Eva *et al.*, 2019). By fostering an environment where employees feel valued and supported, servant leadership enhances both individual and organizational success.

Servant leadership seeks first and foremost to develop followers based on leaders' altruistic and ethical orientation. According to Liden *et al.* (2015), servant leadership behaviour includes emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowering, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first and behaving ethically. Likewise, Vān Dierendonck *et al.* (2017) reported that servant leadership behaviour involves empowerment, accountability, standing back, humility, authenticity, courage, interpersonal acceptance, stewardship, voluntary subordination, authentic self, covenantal relationship, responsible morality, transcendental spirituality, and transforming influence. Moreover, Sendjaya *et al.* (2018) mentioned servant leadership behaviour such as voluntary subordination, authentic self, covenantal relationship, responsible morality, transcendental spirituality, transforming influence.

As of this study, servant leadership is the most suitable due to its characteristics, which are evidently different when compared to other leadership styles. The question of which leadership style is ideal in educational institutions is essential now because there is an increasing need

to improve the academic achievements of school children in line with the global agenda of providing Quality Education for All (Didham & Ofei-Manu, 2015). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 on education and the Education 2030 agenda stress the need to transform educational institutions into organizations that are capable of providing quality education to students (UNESCO, 2015), which can be measured in levels of improved academic achievements among school children in the education system. These needs a leadership style which is supportive like servant leadership. Servant leaders create an environment in which people feel a sense of belonging. As a result, they become committed and ready to assist the students without thinking of their personal benefits.

Tanzania's education system requires effective institutions to bridge knowledge gaps and contribute to sustainable development (Oxfam, 2019; UNICEF, 2019; URT/UNESCO, 2017). Institutional effectiveness is closely linked to the quality of leadership, with effective school leadership serving as a cornerstone of organisational success (Spears, 2010). To enhance school performance and achieve educational objectives, school leaders must adopt leadership styles that promote collaboration, empowerment, and a strong sense of commitment among both staff and students. Identifying and validating a leadership approach that aligns with the specific dynamics of the school environment is essential for producing graduates who are well-prepared to contribute meaningfully to global sustainable development.

Schools employ a range of leadership styles, from autocratic to democratic, each influencing organizational behaviour and student achievement differently (Schroeder, 2016; Sağlam & Alpaydın, 2017). While, debates persist on the most effective leadership model, scholars suggest that servant leadership is particularly well-suited to educational settings. Doraiswamy (2013) and Ibrahim and Don (2014) argue that servant leadership which prioritizes the needs of others and fosters individual growth, aligns with the goals of school organizations. Supporting this perspective, Gocen and Sen (2021), Spears (2010), and Tzu-Bin Lin, Zhang, and Foo (2012) conceptualise leadership as a continuum—with servant leadership at one end and authoritarian leadership at the other—encompassing a range of styles that fall between these two extremes. On the other hand, servant leadership has gained increasing recognition across organizational settings, including schools, due to its positive impact on leadership behaviour, perceptions, and attitudes, which ultimately influence student academic performance (Doraiswamy, 2013; Gocen & Sen, 2021; Spears, 2010). Doraiswamy (2013) highlights the nobility of the teaching profession, emphasizing that servant leadership fosters a sense of vocation and dedication among educators. This

approach empowers teachers, enabling them to serve students more effectively (Schroeder, 2016). Servant leadership is characterised by key attributes, including valuing and developing individuals, fostering a sense of community, demonstrating authenticity, and promoting shared leadership (Taylor *et al.*, 2000). Spears (2010) expands on these qualities, identifying ten key characteristics of servant leadership: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and community-building.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that servant leadership enhances student performance by empowering teachers and promoting a culture of collaboration. Neubert *et al.* (2016) and Gocen and Sen (2021) highlight its role in teacher motivation, while Eva *et al.* (2019) and Liden *et al.* (2014) emphasise its impact on workplace unity. Additionally, Yukl (2013) and Van Dierendonck (2011) link servant leadership to institutional transformation, and Amanchukwu *et al.* (2015) and Bass and Riggio (2006) find it particularly effective in schools. Taylor *et al.* (2000) and Sağlam and Alpaydın (2017) advocate prioritising servant leadership in education to enhance student success. Collectively, these studies underscore the necessity of adopting leadership styles that empower teachers, foster unity, drive change, and improve overall organisational effectiveness.

Servant leadership in schools is particularly appealing because it fosters a sense of honour and service among teachers, who, in turn, extend the same commitment to their students (Schroeder, 2016). Recent studies on educational leadership in Tanzania have examined a range of themes, including the relationship between servant leadership and teacher job satisfaction, the influence of leadership styles on teacher commitment, and the role of school leadership in enhancing educational outcomes in disadvantaged communities (Nduka, 2021; Nyenyembe *et al.*, 2016; Oduro, Dachi, & Fertig, 2008). These studies have primarily examined transformational, transactional, and instructional leadership, highlighting their effectiveness in fostering teamwork, motivation, and commitment among teachers. However, these leadership styles often lack key attributes of servant leadership, such as emotional healing, ethical behaviour, conceptual skills, and a strong emphasis on putting subordinates first (Liden *et al.*, 2015). Servant leaders create an environment that motivates individuals to go beyond their formal duties, making it an ideal leadership approach in the current educational landscape of Mpanda Municipal.

An analysis of six secondary schools: Mwangaza, Kasokola, Kashaulili, Kasimba, Magamba, and Misunkumilo in Mpanda Municipal Council from

2020 to 2022 reveals a concerning trend in student academic performance. In 2020, 32.9% of students (421 out of 1,278) scored in divisions I–III, while 151 scored division zero. In 2021, the percentage of students in divisions I–III slightly decreased to 32.1% (445 out of 1,383), with 144 scoring division zero. By 2022, the percentage had dropped further to 28.8% (465 out of 1,611), while 202 students (12%) scored division zero (Municipal Education Officer Mpanda, 2023). This declining performance highlights the urgent need to assess school leadership styles, particularly those capable of harnessing the potential of both staff and students to improve learning outcomes. Despite extensive research on leadership styles, the application of servant leadership in Tanzania’s public secondary schools remains underexplored. Given the pivotal role of leadership in shaping student success, this study seeks to examine the impact of servant leadership on students’ academic achievement in public secondary schools.

Theoretical Framework: Servant Leadership Theory

This study adopted the Servant Leadership Theory, developed by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970, as its theoretical foundation. Greenleaf’s theory emphasizes the leader’s intrinsic motivation to serve, placing the needs of followers above personal interests and fostering a supportive, people-centered approach to leadership. In educational settings, this leadership style underscores the growth and well-being of students, with a focus on fostering academic, social, and personal success through supportive leadership from teachers, school heads, and school committees (Shen, Leslie, Spybrook, & Ma, 2012; Greenleaf, 1970). The relevance of this theory to the current study lies in its capacity to enhance student engagement and improve teacher-student relationships, ultimately leading to better academic performance. Within environments where servant leadership is practiced, students’ individual needs are addressed effectively, and school leaders demonstrate a genuine concern for students’ academic progress. Servant leadership cultivates a community-oriented school culture that promotes a sense of value and support for students (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Williams & Hatch, 2012). By fostering positive relationships, motivation, and a supportive learning environment, servant leadership can significantly impact students’ academic achievement, providing a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which leadership influences academic success.

Relevance of Servant Leadership in Public Schools

Public schools, which are owned and operated by the government or parastatal entities, provide education from pre-primary to upper secondary levels. The financing of these schools typically relies on public funding strategies, ensuring accountability to the public at large. Servant leadership in

public schools is manifested through various leadership strategies to meet societal expectations for educational outcomes. School leaders, whether explicitly or implicitly, adopt leadership styles that aim to motivate both teachers and students, and these leadership behaviours directly affect the performance of both groups (Meindinyo *et al.*, 2017; Keleem *et al.*, 2021). According to Liden *et al.* (2015), servant leadership behaviours include emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowerment, helping subordinates grow, putting subordinates first, and behaving ethically. Similarly, Van Dierendonck *et al.* (2017) describe servant leadership as involving empowerment, accountability, humility, authenticity, courage, along with the voluntary subordination and ethical self-behaviour that define this approach.

In public school environments, servant leadership seeks to motivate staff and students. Similarly, servant leadership emphasizes the development of followers, grounded in the leader's altruistic and ethical orientation. Leadership practices such as consultative decision-making, fostering trust, providing spiritual and emotional support, listening, and using power ethically reflect servant leadership principles. These leadership practices create a supportive climate, fostering active participation in school activities, including learning (Meindinyo *et al.*, 2017; Stewart, 2017). The influence of servant leadership on motivation leads to an overall positive school climate, improving both teacher job satisfaction and student engagement in the learning process.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design to collect and analyse data efficiently. The quantitative method allowed for objective measurement, causality determination, and generalisation of results (Bryman, 2012; Kaplan, 2004). Six secondary schools were purposively selected from 18, based on declining student performance. Probability sampling was then used to randomly select 126 teachers, 48 students, and 6 parents, ensuring representativeness. Purposive sampling targeted six school heads and one Municipal Education Officer for insights on leadership. The total sample size was 187 participants. Data were collected via a self-constructed questionnaire with a Likert scale and analysed using regression, descriptive, and inferential statistical methods. This combination of purposive and probability sampling balanced context-specific insights and generalizability. The questionnaire was pre-tested to ensure validity and reliability, and content validity was confirmed through expert reviews. Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess reliability. On the other hand,

data collection was conducted under controlled conditions to ensure accuracy and avoid missing data, maintaining the integrity of the analysis.

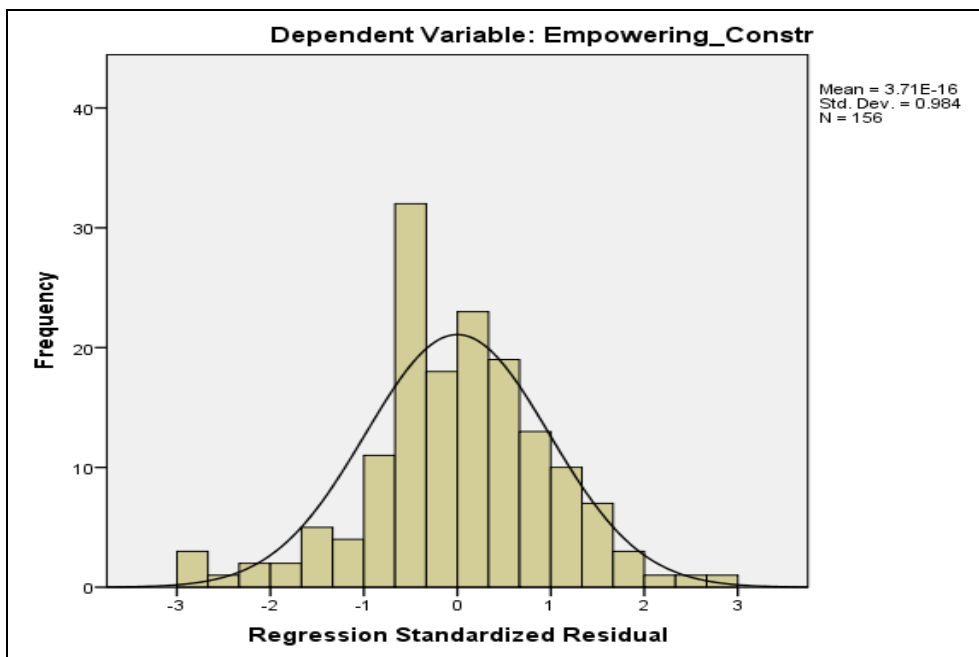
Results and Discussion

This section presents and interprets the findings of the study, focusing on the influence of servant leadership on students' academic achievement in public secondary schools. The results are analysed using both descriptive statistics and inferential methods to identify patterns and relationships within the data. The discussion integrates these findings with existing literature and theoretical perspectives to comprehensively understand how servant leadership practices impact educational outcomes. This analysis also highlights key implications for school leadership and educational policy in the Tanzanian context.

Test of Normality

A test of normality was performed to determine the type of regression analysis on data collected using a Likert scale. From the analysis, as indicated in the graph, linear regression was conducted to determine the attribution indicated on examining the experience of servant leadership behaviours in public secondary schools. Normality output is reported in Graph 1.

Figure 1: Normality output



Source: Filed Data (2023)

Figure 1 revealed that data on empowering subordinates were normally distributed; therefore, linear regression was perceived as ideal for estimating the relationship of variables within the empowerment construct.

Table 1 summarizes the findings regarding the model's predictive power in explaining the relationship between the predictors and the dependent variable.

Table 1
Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.558 ^a	.312	.289	.56537

Note: a. Predictors: (Constant), Putting Subordinates Constr, Conceptual Skills Constr, Emotional Healing_Constr, Creativity_Constr, Helping Subordinates_Constr
b. Dependent Variable: Empowering_Constr

As shown in Table 1, the model indicates a moderate correlation between the predictors and the dependent variable ($R = 0.558$). The R-squared value of 0.312 reveals that approximately 31.2% of the variation in empowerment can be explained by the selected predictors, including emotional healing, conceptual skills, helping subordinates, and putting subordinates' needs first. This suggests that these servant leadership behaviours collectively contribute to fostering school empowerment. The model's moderate predictive power suggests that, although servant leadership factors significantly contribute to empowerment, additional unexamined variables may also influence this outcome. The findings underscore the presence of servant leadership traits within the school environment, reinforcing the critical role these behaviours play in fostering a positive and empowering atmosphere for both teachers and students.

Table 2
Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of the variables in the model
ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	21.722	5	4.344	13.591	.000 ^b
	Residual	47.946	150	.320		
	Total	69.668	155			

Note: a. Dependent Variable: Empowering_Constr
b. Predictors: (Constant), Putting Subordinates Constr, Conceptual Skills Constr, Emotional Healing_Constr, Creativity_Constr, Helping Subordinates_Constr

Table 2 presents the results of the ANOVA test conducted to assess the relationship between subordinate empowerment, as an attribute of servant

leadership, and the leadership behaviours of school heads. The analysis reveals a statistically significant effect of leadership attributes on subordinate empowerment ($F(5, 150) = 13.591, p = 0.000$), indicating that the model explains a meaningful portion of the variation in empowerment. The low p-value ($p < 0.05$) suggests that the leadership behaviours, putting subordinates' needs first, emotional healing, helping subordinates, conceptual skills, and creativity collectively significantly influence empowering subordinates.

The significant F-value also indicates that the regression model provides a good fit for the data, supporting the conclusion that servant leadership attributes effectively predict empowerment outcomes within the school setting. Thus, the results demonstrate that the model reliably captures the relationship between school heads' leadership behaviours and their subordinates' empowerment.

Table 3
 Model Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.015	.332		3.057	.003
	Emotional Healing_Constr	.122	.080	.125	1.517	.131
	Creativity_Constr	.102	.080	.110	1.276	.204
	Conceptual Skills_Constr	.126	.084	.135	1.492	.138
	Helping Subordinates_Constr	.084	.092	.083	.905	.367
	Putting Subordinates_Constr	.217	.058	.295	3.744	.000

Note: a. Dependent Variable: Empowering_Constr

From Table 3, the regression analysis shows that various leadership behaviours predicted subordinate empowerment. Among these, "Putting Subordinates' Needs First" ($\beta = 0.295, t = 3.744, p < 0.005$) was a statistically significant and positive predictor of empowerment. This indicates that school heads who prioritize the needs of their subordinates significantly enhance their empowerment.

On the other hand, "Conceptual Skills" ($\beta = 0.135, t = 1.492, p > 0.005$), "Emotional Healing" ($\beta = 0.125, t = 1.517, p > 0.005$), "Creativity" ($\beta = 0.110, t = 1.276, p > 0.005$), and "Helping Subordinates" ($\beta = 0.083, t = 0.905, p > 0.005$) were not statistically significant predictors of empowerment, as their p-values exceeded the threshold of 0.05.

The results of this study highlight the significant role of "Putting Subordinates' Needs First" as a key predictor of empowerment in the school context, illustrating its essential impact on fostering empowerment among teachers. While other servant leadership attributes, such as emotional healing, conceptual skills, creativity, and helping subordinates, were found to have positive relationships with subordinate empowerment, only prioritizing the needs of others emerged as a significant factor. This finding underscores the importance of servant leadership in promoting empowerment, where school leaders create an environment that allows teachers to feel valued, supported, and motivated to contribute to school goals. Leaders who prioritize their subordinates' well-being enable them to exercise autonomy and engage in decision-making, thereby increasing their commitment and overall job satisfaction (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden *et al.*, 2008; Eva *et al.*, 2019).

Empowerment in the school setting goes beyond giving teachers autonomy; it is about fostering collaboration, shared decision-making, and professional growth. As Reid *et al.* (2022) outlined, school leaders can empower teachers by identifying shared goals, coordinating professional visions, experimenting with new ideas, and expanding professional networks practices that align closely with servant leadership. When school heads facilitate rather than direct, and teachers feel recognized and respected for their contributions, they are more likely to fully engage with the school's mission, positively impacting students' academic performance. While servant leadership is crucial, other factors, such as teacher empowerment and affective commitment, also contribute to achieving educational success.

Conclusion

This study confirms the prevalence of servant leadership behaviours in public secondary schools in Tanzania, with a particular emphasis on "putting subordinates' needs first." This practice significantly fosters teachers' empowerment and engagement, which are key drivers of school academic achievement. While, other servant leadership traits, such as emotional healing, conceptual skills, and creativity, positively influence empowerment, prioritizing teachers' needs proves to be the most impactful. Servant leadership creates a supportive environment where teachers feel valued, motivated, and empowered, enhancing autonomy, decision-making, job satisfaction, and commitment. These factors, coupled with collaboration and professional growth, directly contribute to improved student academic performance. The study recommends that school heads should implement structured professional development programmes to enhance servant leadership practices. These should focus on meeting teachers' needs,

encouraging collaborative decision-making, and applying empowerment strategies to improve overall educational outcomes.

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