



Servant leadership attributes for raising teacher morale in primary schools

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Background: Low teacher morale remains a concern in South African education. The principal's leadership attributes are critical in influencing teacher morale. Servant leadership attributes could contribute to raising teacher morale in the contemporary era.

Aim: This study explored whether servant leadership can be used as a strategy to improve teacher morale in South African public primary schools.

Setting: The research involved schools in the Tshwane South school district in the Gauteng province. Schools in South Africa are categorised into five quintiles based on the socio-economic status of the surrounding community. A school from each of four quintiles was secured to participate in this study.

Methods: A generic qualitative design was used. Individual interviews were conducted with two teachers and a principal from each of the four schools. Purposeful sampling enabled the selection of participants who worked at each school for over 3 years. The study employed thematic data analysis.

Results: Eight servant leadership characteristics emerged from the study. Five corroborated with the widely recognised servant leadership characteristics namely listening, empathy, growth, stewardship and building community. Three emergent servant leadership characteristics are respect, empowerment and caring.

Conclusion: There was overwhelming support for servant leadership from the 12 participants. Servant leadership attributes of listening, empathy, respect, growth, empowerment, stewardship, community building and caring were identified as key to improving teacher morale.

Contribution: School principals can play a role in improving teacher morale by means of enacting servant leadership. Three new servant leadership attributes that emerged in the South African context are respect, empowerment and caring.

Keywords: servant leadership; teacher morale; principals; motivation; job satisfaction; servant leadership attributes.

Introduction

Education is an essential part of a country as it builds the fundamental basis of the knowledge economy. Yet, South Africa's education is faced with many challenges, including poor academic achievements for matric results, high crime in schools, high teacher absenteeism and poor teacher morale (Ndebele, Ravhuhali & Legg-Jack 2022:216). Low levels of teacher morale have been a long-standing issue since South Africa's independence stretching over 29 years (Bantwini 2019:5; Mashaba & Maile 2017:1; Matoti 2010:568; Mboweni & Taole 2022:31). Low teacher morale can negatively affect the retention of quality teachers with a ripple effect on the overall academic results of schools in South Africa (Markandan 2021:1). Of current concern is the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (2021) which indicated that 81% of South Africa's Grade 4 pupils struggled to read with comprehension (Van Staden, Roux & Tshele 2023:4). Hence, it is important to consider the benefits of positive morale in schools, such as academic achievements, school effectiveness and low absenteeism, and train leaders to practise servant leadership in schools (Mboweni & Taole 2022:30). Poor teacher morale in the country has persisted over time but solutions to improve the situation have not materialised. Mboweni and Taole (2022:31) assert that although recommendations to improve teacher morale have been made repeatedly in the literature, the necessary strategic interventions appear

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elusive. Research affirms that leadership can influence teacher morale (Gadson 2018:50; McIlrath & Govender 2021:898). Thus, the present study is concerned with the type of leadership approach that could raise teacher morale.

Conventional leadership styles are characterised by attributes of power and authority which create tensions between leader and follower (Swart, Pottas & Maree 2021:7) and can result in conflict and dissatisfaction as leaders and followers are on different continuums. Although leadership approaches such as situational, transactional, transformational, instructional and distributive have been employed in South African schools, challenges of low teacher morale still exist (McIlrath & Govender 2021:898). Conventional leadership styles still practised in South African education (Bush & Glover 2016:212) are authoritarian and place the leader first. This has an impact on the dynamics between the leader and followers and may contribute to low teacher morale (McIlrath & Govender 2021:898). In South Africa, there have been challenges in boosting staff morale linked to apartheid transitions, traditional leadership hierarchies and historical injustices. Hence, there is a need for leaders who promote social cohesion through service in different organisations (Van Wyk 2017). Servant leaders have the ability to drive a positive shift in leadership styles by cultivating inclusive, ethical and compassionate practices that empower followers and boost staff morale (Swart et al. 2021).

This study investigated how the enactment of socially oriented leadership attributes such as the characteristics of servant leadership influence teacher morale. Characteristics such as 'listening, empathy, healing, foresight, commitment to the growth of others and building a community' (Eva et al. 2019:111) make servant leadership a possible strategy to raise teacher morale. The research question that framed this study is: What are the servant leadership attributes that can raise teacher morale?

Conceptual perspectives

Conceptualising servant leadership

Leadership is about influence, and effective leadership is an absolute necessity for public schools (Shava, Heystek & Chasara 2021:117). School leaders are not only required to promote the effectiveness of schools, but to influence, motivate and improve teacher morale (Mashaba & Maile 2018:10). Leadership styles encompass the key elements of educational leadership which include influence, values and vision (Van Jaarsveld, Mentz & Ellis 2019:604).

Servant leadership is 'a non-traditional leadership philosophy, embedded in a set of behaviours and practices that place the primary emphasis on the well-being of those being served' (Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership 2022:n.p). Key to servant leadership is the service element. Hence, servant leaders prioritise serving their followers (Aboramadan, Dahleez & Hamad 2020:563). A servant leader aspires to 'make a positive difference' for the people they

lead and has an innate 'desire to serve people' (Keith 2012:1). Servant leadership's appeal in the contemporary era is the shift from notions of power and authority to get work accomplished by being of service to the needs of followers. School leadership in South Africa is 'hierarchical' and 'overly bureaucratic' (Naicker & Mestry 2016:5) which threatens 'the professional role of teachers' (Bush 2007:396). Traditional leadership attributes may not change relationships in organisations, they can only define boundaries and exert pressure on power dynamics.

In contrast to transactional leadership, servant leadership uses service to motivate followers to reach goals, whereas the transactional style prioritises rewards and punishment to reach goals (Arar & Oplatka 2022:3). Even though the transformational style priorities value and trust in employees, it is more focussed on organisational goals whereas servant leadership prioritises followers' needs above organisational goals (Arar & Oplatka 2022:3). It is the ultimate goal of servant leaders that once followers' needs are satisfied, ultimately, organisational goals will be achieved through positive relationships and positive morale (Arar & Oplatka 2022:87). Instructional leadership has been practised in South African schools. However, its main concern is quality teaching and learning, having a narrower focus than servant leadership (Arar & Oplatka 2022:85).

A servant leadership style is closely related to the Ubuntu philosophy, which 'is seen as an act of being human, caring, sympathy, empathy, forgiveness and any values of humanness towards others' (Lefa 2015:4). Ubuntu is an African philosophy that emphasises interconnectedness, communal relationships with shared humanity often translated by the phrase, 'I am because we are' (Lefa 2015:4). Like the attributes of servant leadership, Ubuntu places value on community, collectivism, empathy and mutual care. Above all, Ubuntu philosophises that a person's humanity is deeply intertwined with that of others, highlighting kindness, respect and service in a community. Servant leaders prioritise their followers' daily needs, personal development, development of autonomy and the ability to influence others through service. Hence, servant leadership is multifaceted in its appeal and carries the intrinsic potential to provide solutions for improving teacher morale in South African public schools. The uniqueness of servant leadership as reviewed above prompts a closer look at its characteristics.

Characteristics of servant leadership

Greenleaf posited 10 characteristics of servant leaders namely, 'listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building a community' (Spears 2010:26).

Listening involves 'a deep commitment to listening intently to others' (Spears 2010:27). The skill of listening is demonstrated

through 'dialogue, coaching, reflective thinking and counselling' (Bush & Glover 2016:220). Listening facilitates an understanding of different viewpoints on a matter (Van Dierendonck 2013:427). In the context of schools, principals should be able to listen to teachers, learners and the community to enable them to understand their needs and serve them.

Empathy is the ability to accept and recognise people for their 'special and unique spirits' (Spears 2010:27). It is 'the imaginative projection of one's own consciousness into another being' (Greenleaf 1977:10). Empathy is reflected when a leader is able to place themselves in the follower's shoes and distinguish their personal interests from followers' interests. The ability to empathise promotes trust and tolerance between leaders and followers (Van Dierendonck 2013:427). A principal should be able to 'be in the shoes' of teachers to understand their work and the challenges they encounter, to serve them better. A principal who strives to empathise with teachers is highly better placed to understand their work and the challenges they encounter, than one who acts indifferently.

Healing involves taking care of 'the emotional health and wholeness of people' (Spears 2010:27). In today's environment where many people have suffered from broken spirits and emotional hurt 'healing of relationships is a powerful force for transformation and integration' (Spears 2010:27). Servant leaders bring healing to their followers and the community by supporting them physically and mentally, which is essential for creating a healthy workplace (Van Dierendonck 2013:425). Principals should be able to 'bring wholeness' to teachers. Principals who commit themselves to the healing leadership trait, stand a good chance of bringing wholeness to teachers. Emotional wellness issues are a prevalent modern issue that can negatively affect the morale of professionals in any field, and teachers in public schools are no exception.

Awareness is the ability to fully understand and know the surroundings as well as being able to respond accordingly to the surrounding situations (Eva et al. 2019:111). Furthermore, being aware means understanding 'issues involving ethics, power, and values' (Spears 2010:27). It involves a leader's ability to read signals from the environment and be attuned to the surroundings (Keith 2015:48). Principals ought to be aware of the 'values and ideals that shape the school community' for them to be able to serve all stakeholders accordingly (Schroeder 2016:15).

Persuasion is the ability of a leader to make decisions with the team, without coercion (Spears 2010:27). Persuasion clearly differentiates servant leadership from the traditional leadership styles where positional authority is used to reach consensus (Eva et al. 2019:120). Principals should use expert power rather than positional power to get teachers to work (Eva et al. 2019:120). A principal who lacks these leadership skills tends to micro-manage teachers and simply gravitates towards authoritarianism.

Conceptualisation encompasses the visionary aspect of leading and being able to 'think beyond day-to-day realities' (Spears 2010:28). Traditional leaders are focussed on achieving short-term operational goals, and servant leaders 'stretch their thinking to encompass broader-based conceptual thinking' (Spears 2010:28). A leader should strive to balance between operational and strategic thinking (Gupta & Nambudiri 2022:21). Principals should be able to see the entire school as a complete unit in wholeness and make decisions for a complete organisation. The triangulation of strategic and operational thinking creates sound leadership which could be described as pragmatic realism.

Foresight is the ability to learn from the past, and understand the reality of the current context and the likely consequences of future decisions (Spears 2010:27). Foresight is being able to predict the result(s) of handling a situation (Gupta & Nambudiri 2022:22). Foresight is exhibited in reflecting from past experiences, predicting and preparing for the future (Spears 2010:27). Principals exhibit foresight by reflecting and making decisions that benefit teachers, learners and the community.

Stewardship refers to 'the relationship and responsibility stakeholders should feel in holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society' (Bier 2022:11). It involves 'holding something in trust for another' (Spears 2010:29). Servant leaders are committed to serving the needs of followers and are open to input from all stakeholders.

Commitment to the growth of others refers to the servant leaders' duty to advocate for and ensure the development of followers both personally and professionally (Spears 2010:27). Leaders can nurture followers to grow professionally, personally and spiritually (Gupta & Nambudiri 2022:21). As such principals facilitate personal and professional development of teachers and involve teachers in decision-making.

Building a community involves creating a social culture in an organisation to promote unity among people (Spears 2010:27). The 'warmth and love that individuals have for each other' created through service and caring for one another is critical in building a community (Gupta & Nambudiri 2022: 22). Principals should be able to create an environment where teachers and the community are involved and engaged in the development of the school.

Theoretical framework

The study was viewed through the lens of Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation and Herzberg's (1987) two-factor theory. Maslow (1943) presented a hierarchy of needs from lower to higher order needs, which are physiological, safety and security, social, esteem and self-actualisation. Herzberg (1987) posited a two-factor theory premised upon hygiene factors and motivators. Hygiene factors including pay, status, security, working conditions and interpersonal relations in the workplace are essential to avoid dissatisfaction

(Matla & Xaba 2020:725). Motivators include meaningful work, challenging work and recognition which lead to positive satisfaction (Peramatzis & Galanakis 2022:973). The two models are linked to servant leadership in that Maslow (1943) focussed on staff life (social aspect) while Herzberg (1987) concentrated on the organisational context (work aspect) as an element of motivation. The two theories are widely accepted as the theoretical foundation of motivation because they link directly to the relationship between leadership and staff morale in the workplace. In this study, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs theory presents the importance of an employee's intrinsic needs, while Herzberg's (1987) two-factor theory presents the importance of an employee's extrinsic needs in the workplace.

Research methods and design

The study utilised a qualitative research approach, underpinned by an interpretive paradigm to gather subjective but personal explanations of both principals and teachers. Interpretivism enables understanding of the problem being researched by getting 'into the head of the matter being studied to understand the subjective world of human experience' (Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger 2020:2). A qualitative approach permits the examination and interpretation of experiences that could not be quantified (Aspers & Corte 2021:601). A generic qualitative design was employed because the study depended on interview data only and could not 'claim allegiance to a single established design' (Kahlke 2018:2). In-depth individual interviews were conducted with eight teachers and four principals. Interviews facilitated the exploration of participants' thoughts and feelings and considered 'the personal context in which the participants responded' (Aguas 2020:8). The interview guide for teachers comprised 11 questions, seven of which probed participants' views about teacher morale and job satisfaction. The remaining four questions dealt with the leadership style of the principal as well as the participants' understandings and views of servant leadership. The interview guide for the principals was similar but the first five questions were rephrased to inquire about the staff's morale, staff turnover and job satisfaction. This was followed by five questions that explored the principal's views of own leadership style as well as own understanding and views of servant leadership.

Four primary schools in the same school district participated in the study. Schools were from quintiles 1–4 of the five different quintiles as a school in quintile 5 could not be secured for the study just after the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. A quintile system classifies South African public schools into five groups, according to the socioeconomic status of the surrounding community. Quintiles 1–3 are the poorest schools and are located in economically disadvantaged areas. Learners in these schools do not pay school fees and are funded by the South African government. Furthermore, learners receive additional support such as feeding schemes for nutritional supplements. Quintiles 4–5 are located in high-income areas and learners pay school fees. These schools receive less government

funding and are more affluent (Naicker 2014:178). Participants were selected purposefully on condition that both principals and teachers had worked for three and more consecutive years at the same school to have experienced the leadership behaviours of the principal. Participants at each school comprised one principal and two teachers. Although there were no specific gender requirements, demographic information for the sample was made up of seven females and five males. In total, there were 12 participants.

Data collection

Individual interviews were the main source of data, allowing for the collection of rich data from participants (Ellis & Hart 2023:1760). Data were collected during and after the peak COVID-19 period through individual interviews either with participants face-to-face and online through a Microsoft Teams meeting. Data collection arrangements of setting up the times and dates for the interviews were conducted together with explanations of the research, handing out consent forms and the research approval letter from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE). Consent to record the interviews was sought from each participant, and the interviews took approximately 50 min–60 min per participant interview. On the day of the interview, issues of anonymity and confidentiality were further emphasised.

Data analysis

Data from the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was used to 'identify themes and patterns in the data' utilising the process of coding and categorising towards the formulation of themes (Aguas 2020:3466). Guba and Lincoln's (1985:218) measures of trustworthiness were applied. Credibility was applied through the meticulous analysis of the data (Jahja, Sri Ramalu & Razimi 2021:4). Transferability was ensured by the use of detailed descriptions of the data (Jahja et al. 2021:4). Dependability was ensured by fully disclosing the research procedures (Rose & Johnson 2020:440). Conformability was ensured through member checking and scrutinising researcher bias (Rose & Johnson 2020:443).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the relevant Research Ethics Committees of the University of Johannesburg. The ethics reference number is SEM 2-2019-015. Thereafter, permission to conduct the study was applied for and granted by the GDE. All participants in the study participated voluntarily and could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Informed written consent was obtained from the interviewees. Participants had the right to equality, justice, human dignity and life and protection against harm. The study fully disclosed the research aims, processes and possible consequences. Written consent was requested for interviews and audio recordings. The data collected were always kept private, anonymous and confidential. The researcher upheld the right to privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of research participants.

Results

Eight attributes were found to influence teacher morale in South African schools. These were listening, empathy, respect, growth, empowerment, stewardship, community building and caring. The findings will be presented with verbatim quotes from the study participants.

Listening

The findings confirmed that listening is the foundation for effective communication and the cornerstone for positive relationships between leader and follower, and ultimately for positive morale. Teacher participants were unanimous about the need for principals to listen because listening forms the basis for effective communication which can make or break relationships. Furthermore, teacher morale was negatively affected when principals 'did not listen'. Teachers from the four different schools expressed their views in the quotes that follow:

'She [*principal*] gives instructions, and you cannot say no, she is very arrogant and doesn't listen to anyone except herself.' (Teacher 1 in School 1)

'Job satisfaction for me is having a peace of mind at work, having all the resources you need, and of course have your manager support you and listens to you, and open lines of communication.' (Teacher 1 in School 2)

'And that's when the morale comes down. When one [*school principal*] doesn't listen. It puts everyone off.' (Teacher 1 in School 3)

'You know, when you feel that whatever you say no one listens to it, then you become quiet.' (Teacher 1 in School 4)

Teachers further explained the value of listening to the principal and how it affects morale as elaborated:

'I have seen that our principal is a good listener and asks for input. That way you open up and feel important. Morale will definitely improve if teachers are empowered and listened to.' (Teacher 2 in School 2)

'Morale is sometimes low and sometimes high. You can tell when you go into a staff meeting that teachers are sometimes happy and sometimes not happy. There are many factors to it such as the type of leader we have now is different from the previous one in terms of how he communicates and listens.' (Teacher 2 in School 3)

It is interesting to note that out of the four principals, only one principal from School 4 identified listening as an important attribute to raise teacher morale as expressed:

'I realised that the time that I started to get engaged, to listen, to walk around, the motivation started to show, and the morale was positive. We could talk and laugh now.' (Principal in School 4)

The findings are supported by Kyumbi (2021:71) who discovered a positive correlation between leaders' ability to listen and increased morale. Scholars, Simamora, Sudiarditha and Yohana (2019:19) further confirmed that staff morale was low when leaders did not listen. When

leaders listen to their followers, they can better understand their needs and respond appropriately (Herzberg 1987:8; Maslow 1943:372).

Empathy

It became clear from teachers in all four schools that in order to raise teacher morale, principals were expected to show empathy towards teachers. A teacher remarked that they:

'Want a leader that understands what teachers goes through each day.' (Teacher 1 in School 3)

In School 1, a teacher lamented a lack of empathy was evident stating that, 'If I go to her with a problem, she doesn't put herself in my shoes before commenting'. A teacher from School 4 reiterated:

'You know we speak amongst ourselves as teachers and the common issue is that we need to be supported. We need someone to understand what we do, the amount of work we do, the challenges we face. Someone who empathises with you, who carries the load with you.' (Teacher 2 in School 4)

Principals echoed the need for empathy as explained by a principal from School 2 that 'there was a time when morale was poor when COVID started' and teachers thought that she (the principal) 'didn't empathise with them' and the relationships were sour.

At School 4, a principal elaborated on the benefits of being empathetic to teachers:

'When I [*principal*] started to get involved and get to take their [*teachers*] classes when they were absent from school, they in return started to open up about classroom challenges. And I realised that the time that I started to get engaged, to listen, to walk around, the motivation started to show, and the morale was positive, we could talk and laugh now.' (Principal in School 4)

There was evidence of positive morale in schools where the principal showed empathy as expressed by a teacher from School 4:

'At times when you are carrying a burden, a heavy load, you want someone [*principal*] like that. I mean when things are not okay, and you want words of support, he's able to talk to you about it, you know empathy. You actually feel encouraged and also you feel, I mean, motivated to your work ...' (Teacher 2 in School 4)

Similar findings were reported by Meyers et al. (2019:161), who found that there is a positive relationship between morale and empathy. Empathy is transferable; for example, when a principal demonstrates empathy to teachers, teachers would do the same to learners and help them in their learning (Meyers et al. 2019:161). In the Ubuntu philosophy, empathy is a core value of humanness towards others (Lefa 2015:4). The attribute of empathy is enunciated in both Maslow's (1943:372) and Herzberg's (1978:8) theories of motivation, in that a leader should understand how the followers feel in the job and what they do, so as to be able to satisfy their needs and provide an environment conducive for positive outcomes.

When principals show empathy to teachers, they would transmit messages of care and trust which builds positive morale. Both Maslow (1943:372) and Herzberg (1987:8) articulate the importance of leaders understanding intrinsic and extrinsic factors that affect employee motivation. Maslow's (1943) model points to the intrinsic (personal) factors influencing motivation whereas Herzberg (1987) points to the extrinsic (organisational) factors influencing motivation, and both sets of factors are critical for a person's motivation.

Respect

The role of teachers has been looked down upon, in comparison to the past, where teachers were valued members of the community and were given much respect. All 12 participants identified 'respect' as being key to improving teacher morale. Some quotes from teachers are provided to illustrate this finding:

'The relationships between parents and teachers are such that there is a lack of community respect and recognition of teachers.' (Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 in School 1)

'There was a time when there were so many complaints from learners in my class, and the principal came to the class and summoned me in front of learners. She then took me to her office and reprimanded me. Yoh, I lost the respect and trust, which a teacher should have from these learners.' (Teacher 2 in School 2)

'So, for me if management respects and support teachers, the morale will be good.' (Teacher 2 in School 3)

The need for respect was also voiced by principals, as in the following remarks:

'I respect people "you are because I am." Ubuntu is very important to me. I treat teachers as adults who know what they are doing.' (Principal in School 1)

'Staff satisfaction, staff feel that the school is a safe and secure place where they are respected and supported through good relationships and resourcing ... (Principal in School 3)

The findings are consistent with those of Erichsen and Reynolds (2020:3), who acknowledged that teacher morale increased when they felt that the principal and learners respected them. In Ubuntu philosophy, respect is a core value of humanness towards others, and is a critical element in building positive relationships (Lefa 2015:4). The need for respect is supported by Maslow (1943:372), who confirmed that people who lacked self-esteem and respect for others developed feelings of inferiority and felt worthless. This in turn triggered low morale and negativity. Dissenting voices can emerge, loud or muted, from individuals dealing with such insecurities. Additionally, Herzberg (1987:8) opined that to eliminate job dissatisfaction, leaders should create and support a culture of respect and dignity for followers.

Growth

There was evidence from participants that a lack of growth opportunities affected teacher morale negatively. The lack of professional development and limited positions for

promotions caused frustrations among teachers. A lack of growth opportunities is expressed in the teachers' quotes that follow:

'When you are a teacher, you also want to grow to the positions such as the HOD and principal are the only ones that you can grow to. So, all of these factors do affect how I feel about my job.' (Teacher 1 in School 1)

Another teacher added:

'Most of the elements that frustrate teachers are caused by not listening, no professional development and no opportunity for growth.' (Teacher 2 in School 4)

'[U]ncertainty about the future, where you can see that you are not moving forward. Factors such as the leadership giving you opportunities to grow. I will remain a teacher for how many years? There is no room for growth, and just not being happy in the job.' (Teacher 2 in School 4)

One principal from School 2 acknowledged that skills development for teachers contributed to positive morale as elaborated upon:

'We arranged some internal training and I saw some positivity in the teachers. So, since then I have been arranging short training for teachers and they are happy about it. They get to attend as a group after classes, we arrange cake and tea, and they enjoy this.' (Principal in School 2)

Gupta and Nambudiri (2022:22) and Hammond (2018:23) found that when a leader creates growth opportunities for followers, it results in positive morale. Maslow (1943:372) identified growth needs to be at the top of the pyramid, for as a person desires to grow and be the best that he or she can be self-actualisation can occur. Similarly, Herzberg (1987:8) emphasised the need for leaders to offer training and development opportunities, so that employees can pursue certain positions in the organisation because it contributes to positive morale. Principals should thus create platforms for the development of teachers to enhance positive morale.

Empowerment

Teachers expressed dissatisfaction about the lack of empowerment of teachers; for example:

'It's very frustrating to have a principal that does not acknowledge your work, doesn't empower us.' (Teacher in School 1)

In Schools 2 and 3, teachers felt that principals tried to empower them, and they felt appreciated as stated respectively:

'She tries her best to empower us to make teaching interesting and also supports some of the ideas that teachers may have.' (Teacher 1 in School 2)

'He gives us freedom to try and do our thing. And he doesn't always just say, well, this is my way and there's no other way to do.' (Teacher 2 in School 3)

Teachers want to be involved, empowered and engaged in school operations as this contributes towards trust and feelings of being valued. The findings are congruent with the findings of Tindowen (2019:18), who found that teacher morale

increased when they were empowered. Similarly, Bier (2022:11) confirmed that empowering teachers resulted in 'a culture of mutual caregiving, a sense that we are all-in-this-together, and that leadership has everyone's best interest at heart'. For employees to reach self-actualisation, they need to be empowered for individual fulfilment (Maslow 1943:372) which results in positive morale. Moreover, Herzberg (1987:8) confirmed that leaders can delegate certain responsibilities to followers to empower them for the next position, which contributes to positive job satisfaction and morale.

Stewardship

Teachers felt that it is the duty of the principal to be a steward and that principals be more involved in bringing the school's stakeholders together and building positive relationships. A teacher from School 2 explained that it is the 'responsibility of principal to bring people together to work'.

A principal at School 4 acknowledged that principals should practise stewardship as remarked:

'I understand that my position is not one of authority to laud it over others. Rather I am there to responsibly serve the needs of the community in humility: children, staff, and parents or guardians to ensure that they are supported to reach the goal of excellent education in a happy and constructive environment.' (Principal in School 4)

In Schools 1 and 4, respectively, relationships between teachers and the parents in the school community appeared strained:

'The relationships between parents and teachers are sour such that there is a lack of community respect and recognition of teachers.' (Teacher 2 in School 1)

'Teachers, yes, I give examples of I think they are at loggerheads with management; hence their morale is always low. If you are in good books with management, then you will not find reason to leave.' (Teacher 2 in School 4)

The findings indicated that teachers expected principals to do more in terms of building relationships between the school and the community. A study by Gupta and Nambudiri (2022:21) suggested that principals need to 'take care of the school's progress and serve teachers for the greater good of society' to promote a supportive learning environment that ultimately raises teacher morale. The findings tie in with Maslow's (1943:372) emphasis on the importance of social needs. Leaders who support their followers should create an environment that encourages effective socialisation and meaningful contribution as this contributes towards job satisfaction and positive morale. Herzberg (1987:8) further reiterated that stewardship promotes positive relationships and adds to positive relationships and ultimately positive morale.

Community building

There was evidence from all participants that a lack of community building strongly affected teacher morale. A teacher from School 1 commented that teachers felt 'rejected by the community'.

In School 2, a teacher appreciated the role of the principal who 'promoted interaction with peers' and whose rhetoric prompted reflection to 'ask yourself how I can make a difference in the life of the learners' and 'do more for the community'.

A principal from school 4 acknowledged the responsibility of building community as stated:

'[T]o responsibly serve the needs of the community in humility: children, staff, and parents or guardians to ensure that they are supported to reach the goal of excellent education in a happy and constructive environment.' (Principal in School 4)

A principal from School 4 provided an example of building community relations:

'When I became deputy principal [*in this same school*] I noticed that most staff were white, and most children or parents were black. I sensed a feeling of parents feeling at arms' length. I began to put into place things that would make parents feel more a part of the family or community.' (Principal in School 4)

The findings confirmed the importance of community building towards teacher morale. The findings were corroborated by Gupta and Nambudiri (2022:22), who found that community building generated a supportive climate that improved staff morale and job satisfaction. Furthermore, Ubuntu philosophy emphasises community building as a core value of humanness towards others (Lefa 2015:4). Maslow's (1943:372) higher-order needs indicate that social needs contribute towards motivation and job satisfaction. Herzberg (1987:8) further supports that community building created belonging and positive relationships in the workplace which resulted in positive morale. Principals should create communities that encourage social cohesion and positive outcomes.

Caring

Teachers at School 1 felt that principals lacked a demonstration of care, and this caused frustration and low morale as expressed:

'I was admitted in a hospital because of stress, and some of the teachers when they wanted to visit me, they were given work so that they don't get time to visit ... How can one not be human when someone is in hospital?' (Teacher 1 in School 1)

'[The principal] did not care about how others feel.' (Teacher 2 in school 1)

However, there was a notable difference in Schools 2, 3 and 4 where there were elements of care from the principal. A teacher at School 3 described the principal as 'family oriented' while at School 2, the principal explained that the nature of 'relationships in the school' was to 'work as a very close family'. Teachers want principals to have the attribute of care because teachers are 'drained physically and emotionally' and expect principals to bring much-needed healing to the teaching environment.

Even though teachers concurred on the need for servant leadership attributes to improve teacher morale, a principal

from School 2 questioned if it was possible to possess all the required characteristics. The principal remarked:

‘A lot of these factors are critical for the teachers and if I can do all I believe they would be a change. Like I said when I opened up, they also opened up, when I show humanness, they do the same, so I believe that whatever I do they will do similar. My question is that can one person have all the characteristics you said. I would like to have all but is it possible [laughs]? But, hey if one can do all that, I can tell you the morale of teachers will change, because from some of the characteristics that I practice like empathy, humanness, I have seen its impact.’ (Principal in School 2)

Scholars concur that when a leader provides care through emotional support, morale improves (Gupta & Nambudiri 2022:21; Hashim et al. 2020:14). Therefore it was apparent that principals should consistently invest in positive relationships of care with teachers to raise teacher morale. Using Maslow’s and Herzberg’s theories of motivation as a lens, the findings highlight the importance of addressing teachers’ higher-level needs for respect, fulfilment and growth – needs that are also central to servant leadership. Both Maslow’s and Herzberg’s theories suggest that servant leadership aligns closely with job satisfaction and deep motivation, promoting empowerment, engagement and ultimately positive morale.

Discussion

The findings showed that teacher morale is strongly affected by the leadership style of principals through the leadership attributes practised. Not all of Greenleaf’s (1977) 10 characteristics of servant leadership are featured in the findings of this study. Of the 10 characteristics of ‘listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building a community’ (Spears 2010:26), five did not feature. These five that were not identified as influencing teacher morale in South African public schools were awareness, conceptualisation, persuasion, foresight and healing. However, three emerging characteristics from the study were respect, empowerment and caring. The characteristics of respect, empowerment and caring align closely with Ubuntu’s principles that emphasise interconnectedness, mutual support and shared responsibility for empowering followers which are specific to the African moral framework. Therefore, the Ubuntu philosophy underpins servant leadership attributes in the South African context where community-centredness, empathy and shared responsibility strengthen the bond between leadership and communal success. Both ubuntu philosophy and servant leadership share a focus on serving others to uplift the collective community with an emphasis on empathy, respect and ethical responsibility. The findings clearly demarcated ubuntu as a holistic cultural framework for African communal living and not a leadership style, whereas servant leadership was seen as a leadership style that has similar values to serve and elevate followers’ morale.

The findings ultimately confirmed that principals can serve and lead, blending compassion and direction guided by the school vision. While using the servant leadership attributes to serve, principals will still be able to lead guided by the vision of the school thereby balancing the need to serve and lead at the same time. Ultimately, using the attributes, enables principals to create supportive environments that enhance well-being, achievement and collaboration in the school community. Furthermore, the study findings led to the conceptualisation of a model of servant leadership.

Model of servant leadership

A model emerged from the study highlighting four essential components that principals can consider in addressing teacher morale in South African public schools as illustrated in Figure 1.

The principal servant leadership model has four components as depicted in Figure 1. The first component is ‘Servant leadership attributes’ and posits four leadership attributes that principals should practise to raise teacher morale in the schools as elaborated. The first is ‘listening’ which is demonstrated by open communication within the school. Principals should maintain high levels of respect and honesty in all communications with teachers to encourage dialogue and engagement. The second attribute is ‘respect’ which implores principals to appreciate the diversity of opinions and ideas from teachers and demonstrate respect to teachers in front of learners, parents and the community. This attribute is critical in the promotion of both diversity and inclusion at the workplace as well as in the community. The attribute of respect provides an opportunity and platform for dissenting voices to be heard, as opposed to being perceived as a problem that needs to be solved by a leader. As servant leaders, principals can be the conduit through which teachers get recognition and appreciation for their work in society. The third attribute is ‘empathy’ where principals are attuned to teachers’ needs and challenges and are cognisant of their feelings.

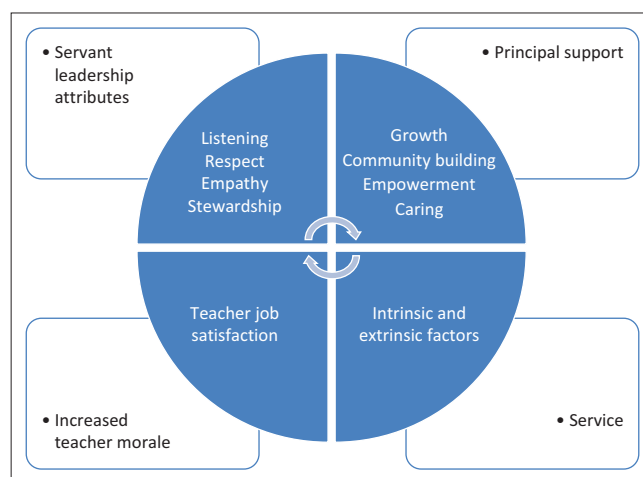


FIGURE 1: Principal servant leadership model for improving teacher morale.

Principals should demonstrate altruistic behaviour by prioritising the needs of teachers before their own. Principals should never turn a blind eye to the plight of teachers and take this up with the government and the community. Finally, 'stewardship' is the fourth attribute which places principals in the right position to serve the school community by practising moral and ethical leadership and to bring teachers and the community to work together. Principals should inspire teachers to be devoted to serving the community and be involved in community projects that involve parents, community and government. The model is supported by the theoretical framework of the study as presented by Maslow's (1968) need for safety, growth and social needs in the workplace. Employees desire to be free from threats to physical and emotional injury and it is through the leadership style of the leader that employees are assured of safety. Herzberg's (1987) two-factor theory supports that the quality of supervision as presented in the leadership style influences employee satisfaction which ultimately affects morale.

The second component in the model (Figure 1) is principal 'support'. Teachers desire to be supported by the principal, professionally, emotionally and personally to promote trust in the school. Principals are required to take time to cultivate and maintain positive relationships with teachers. In supporting the teachers, principals would be able to understand intrinsic and extrinsic factors that affect teacher morale. Principals should provide support linked to the four attributes of growth, community building, empowerment and caring for teachers.

'Service', the third component, beckons principals to be servant leaders and be in service to satisfy the intrinsic and extrinsic needs of teachers. Principals should pay attention to 'intrinsic factors' that influence teachers' perceptions and attitudes about their profession. Intrinsic factors such as the involvement of teachers in decision-making, according to them respect, supporting the recognition of teachers in society and providing growth opportunities are likely to raise teacher motivation and ultimately morale. Principals ought to further pay attention to extrinsic factors such as reduced workload, learner discipline and providing resources for teachers to be able to do their work. Principals should be advocates for teachers and speak out about poor discipline of learners and poor resources in schools so that the government can intervene. Principals need to serve teachers' intrinsic and extrinsic needs as presented in the theoretical framework of Maslow's (1943) and Herzberg's (1987) theories of motivation. When principals serve the needs of teachers, it will lead to teacher job satisfaction.

When the three components of the model 'servant leadership attributes', 'principal support' and 'service' are in place and practised, the outcome would likely be 'increased teacher morale', which forms component four of the model (Figure 1).

Conclusion

The focus of the study was to explore servant leadership attributes that can raise teacher morale in South African public primary schools. Primary school teachers are subjected to class sizes that can extend to over 50 learners resulting in 'didactical neglect, discipline issues and negative teacher attitudes' (West & Meier 2020:1). It is therefore noteworthy, particularly for contemporary school leaders, in a primary school setting, that the study found that teacher morale could be influenced by the leadership attributes of listening, empathy, respect, growth, empowerment, stewardship, community building and caring. Servant leadership should be viewed not only as a strategy for raising the morale of those who are led but could also be included in the curriculum in primary schools to build a culture of service to the community. Research on servant leadership in South African public schools is fairly limited and more empirical work is to be carried out in this domain. However, the findings of this study accentuate that the practice of servant leadership attributes by principals can raise teacher morale. While it is possible that servant leadership attributes may be influenced and compromised by an individual's personality and relationships to varying degrees and effect, servant leadership remains one of the missing ingredients in the pot for boosting and raising teacher morale in public schools. Unlike transformational, transactional and distributive leadership styles that focus more on achieving goals and inspiring change through the leader's vision, servant leadership places the needs of followers at its core, promoting empowerment, respect and a supportive environment. Servant leadership aligns closely with Ubuntu, fostering a culture of respect and mutual support. Thus, it provides a meaningful lens to explore values-driven, community-centred leadership impact which is needed in South Africa. There was overwhelming support for servant leadership from all the teachers and principals in the study. However, it was raised whether one individual could possess all the required servant leadership attributes. The authors thus propose that the eight attributes that emerged as relevant to the South African context serve as an ideal for school leaders and managers to be aware of, as they endeavour to incorporate these in their leadership practices. Ultimately, the study demonstrated that servant leadership is a broad-based and multi-pronged professional ingredient that is missing in the endeavours or attempts by principals to raise teacher morale in public primary schools.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

R.K.M. conceptualised the article, gathered the data, analysed the data and wrote the article, and S.R.N. was the doctoral study supervisor who guided all aspects of the study and the article writing including conceptualisation, methodology, academic writing, review and editing and selection of the journal.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, R.K.M., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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