# Strengths and Weaknesses in Applying Servant Leadership in Schools in the Age of Independence Learning: A Literature Review

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**Abstract**

This research aims to conduct an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses that arise in implementing servant leadership in schools in the era of Kurikulum Merdeka (KM). Using a qualitative approach, literature study is the method used in this research. The data source in this research is peer-reviewed journal articles that have been published by accredited journal publishers from the Scopus and Google Scholar databases. The article search process begins with exploring articles from the Scopus and Google Scholar portals. We visit official article pages to strictly select trusted sources from the start. By establishing exclusion and inclusion criteria, we selected 79 articles and determined 11 articles as primary data sources. The results of this research show that the application of servant leadership in schools can provide 12 positive impacts that are beneficial for teachers, education staff, students, and the performance of school organizations which can be accepted as an element of strength in efforts to achieve school goals. However, there is a threat of chaos in the school organization when the implementation of servant leadership is not supported by adequate detailed guidelines. We recommend that education policymakers design and establish detailed guidelines regarding servant leadership in schools.

Keywords: Servant leadership, Management of school, Kurikulum Merdeka.

## INTRODUCTION

School activities as an organization providing educational services (Presiden Republik Indonesia, 2021) are controlled by a leader (Mitrohardjono, 2020) which is moderated by his leadership style. This aspect of the leadership style applied by the school principal can influence school performance tendencies, teacher motivation and performance (Sari et al., 2022), culture (Rustanto, 2018) and organizational climate (Mavİ & Özdemİr, 2023), and the school's relationship with guardians of students (Santi et al., 2023), and whether or not school goals have been achieved. Due to the position of the school principal who plays an important role in school management (Dare & Saleem, 2022), an effective school leadership style is needed (Kemendikbud, 2020) so that school performance can run as it should, according to the context of the school's goals.

The Independence learning policy, which is mapped into a number of strategic policy episodes (Jayanti et al., 2021), is currently becoming the regulatory axis

governing school administration in Indonesia today. One episode of the Independent Learning policy is the Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) policy (Thohir et al., 2021) which is implemented nationally (Kemdikbud, 2022). Initially, the Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) was introduced as a prototype curriculum that was tested and applied to educational units implementing the Driving School Program (PSP) only (Marheni et al., 2023). Then gradually, it became mandatory for all schools in Indonesia to apply from the 2024-2025 academic year (Ali Muckromin et al., 2023).

Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) was initiated as a formula to respond to the findings of learning disorientation which was exacerbated by learning loss as a result of the global Covid-19 disaster. One of the main principles in Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) is learning that supports students (Zuhro et al., 2023). This principle has implications for trends in school activities that need to be adjusted, including the school principal's leadership style. Learning that supports students means that learning is tailored to three things; students' learning readiness, students' learning profiles, and students' learning needs (Elizabeth & Hau, 2023; Kemendikbudristek, 2022). This encourages school principals to be able to create open school management to internalize the elements of choice and a sense of ownership of the school community. School management that is open and internalizes these three elements cannot be done without a leadership style that listens and cares. These two criteria refer to the servant leadership style. A leadership model that serves and has the characteristic of prioritizing the interests and aspirations of other people rather than personal interests (Yengkopiong, 2023).

The review above finds harmony between Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) and the servant leadership style in Indonesian schools. Ironically, the pre-research interview we conducted with the principal of one of the educational units implementing the Driving School Program (PSP) showed the opposite result. He showed a number of evidences that school management has the power to be open, listen, and serve voice, choice and ownership. A suggestion box is provided to absorb the aspirations of the school community, minutes of meetings held by deliberation, videos of student-parent meetings showing collegial collective decision-making, and much more. The results indicate several weaknesses. First, the decision-making process takes a slower time. Second, there are inconsistent consensus decisions. Third, the school principal feels that his authority is reduced - while he still carries a large responsibility in front of the audit actors. This is a fact that we find to be contrary.

Recently, it has become known that more and more research has recommended the implementation of servant leadership in schools. When there are case facts that weaken it, of course this needs to be investigated further first. We see that on the one hand, theoretical studies indicate that servant leadership is a school leadership style that is considered effective in schools today. But on the other hand, there are cases that show the opposite. This discrepancy is an important domain to research. If ignored, there is the potential for errors in understanding the application of servant leadership in schools. Furthermore, management activities in certain schools can experience serious chaos due to implementing irrelevant leadership styles.

In that context, this study has a certain urgency. How the adventages are brought from actualization of servant leadership in school. Is there a weakness in there. Then if it's true, how we can to overcome that weakness. This research is intended to answer those three questions with the method of literature review.

## RESEARCH METHOD

Using a qualitative approach (Fadhli, 2020; Fadli, 2021), literature study (Xiao & Watson, 2019) is the method used in this research (Gunarso et al., 2023). By paying attention to the characteristics of the research problem being studied, we focused on reviewing related research reports (Assiri et al., 2020) so that the results can provide objective information about the implementation of servant leadership in schools. Of course, by containing strengths and weaknesses at the same time (Hadziahmetovic et al., 2023). This paradigm makes the data source in this research a journal article (Abrar Sulthani, 2023) that has been published by an accredited journal publisher. We chose the Scopus database (Maphosa & Maphosa, 2023) and Google Scholar as the main data sources (Kartakusumah et al., 2023). The article search process begins with exploring articles from the Scopus and Google Scholar portals. We visit official article pages to strictly select trusted sources from the start. This stage resulted in the acquisition of 79 articles. Next, we again selected articles using exclusion and inclusion criteria. See the Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria in Screening Literature Sources

| Aspect | Inclusion | Exclusion |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Source Type | Journal articles from Scopus and Google Scholar databases | Books, published articles without DOI, without URL links or corrupt files, publication notes and duplicate articles |
| Year of Publication | Journal articles published in January 2016 – February 2024 | Journal articles published before January 2016. |
| Language | English | Other languages (Chinese, Indian, Spanish, Russian and others) |
| Context | Servant Leadership in Schools | Servant Leadership not in schools (for example in financial institutions, etc.) |
| Theme | Education concept | Not an educational concept |

Source: Modified from Dai & Ke (2022)

Strict selection using inclusion and exclusion criteria aims to obtain appropriate literature sources (Chichekian & Benteux, 2022). This stage resulted in the publication of 37 articles. Then the remaining 42 articles were each reviewed thoroughly as a final selection stage. In this process we focus on selecting which articles the discussion is truly in accordance with the research objectives. As a result, 31 articles were deleted and 11 other articles were determined to be articles that met the criteria. These 11 articles were then studied intensely and in depth. Metadata from the articles is tabulated into a table of article analysis results by mapping the author's name and year of publication, title, type of research, and data source, as well as assessments produced by research on the application of servant leadership in schools.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Results**

Servant leadership is a leadership style that serves, empowers (Dimitrakaki, 2023) and develops individuals and groups (Andrade, 2023), prioritizing their welfare over the desires of the individual leader (Yengkopiong, 2023). This leadership style emphasizes service through teamwork and a culture of mutual support (Khan et al., 2022). This leadership style emphasizes ethics and morality, increasing the achievement of organizational goals through service to others (Pawar et al., 2020). The emphasis on empathy and service makes servant leadership an alternative for reducing potential stress and overcoming trauma (Mahon, 2021) in organizational members. We see Servant leadership as a leadership style that first developed in the business industry sector. Then, along with the high prestige due to the ethical characteristics inherent in servant leadership (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022), developments over time, and transdisciplinary trends, this style was then internalized by modern educational institutions.

The internalization of the concept of leadership from the business industry to the education sector is inseparable from developments in educational science spearheaded by related research, as well as the high hopes of educational leadership entities to accelerate the achievement of the goals of the institutions they lead. The application of servant leadership in educational institutions is believed to be able to increase personal growth and development, conflict management, team cohesion, performance, job satisfaction, work climate, and organizational culture (Sawan et al., 2023). However, there are a number of studies that emphasize certain weaknesses that are feared to arise. The following are the results of the article analysis that we have carried out. See the Table 2.

Table 2. Results of Article Analysis

| Author Name (Publication Year) | Research Title | Research Type & Data Source | Results of Research and Assessment of Servant Leadership Practices in Schools |
|---|---|---|---|
| (Zhang & Liu, 2023) | Leading by Serving; How Can Servant Leadership Influence Teacher Emotional Well-being? | Quantitative; Convenience Sampling Survey. 449 respondents from primary and secondary schools in China | Servant leadership has a positive influence on teachers' emotional well-being through actions that provide recognition, appreciation and emotional regulation. Servant Leadership is also in navigating the challenges schools are facing due to the pandemic |

| Author Name (Publication Year) | Research Title | Research Type & Data Source | Results of Research and Assessment of Servant Leadership Practices in Schools |
|---|---|---|---|
| (Wiwik et al., 2023) | The Servant Leadership Effect on Student Engagement Mediated by Student Motivation at X Christian Senior High School in Surabaya | Causal-comparative quantitative. 201 students in grade 11 of the science study program at X Christian School in Surabaya, Indonesia | Servant leadership at Christian High School "X" Surabaya has a positive impact on the presentation of student involvement through teacher subordination behavior, self-authentication, responsible morality. There is also a transformational influence mediated by student motivation |
| (Willian, 2023) | Servant Leadership School Principles in Improving Teacher Performance at SMPN 7 Mataram, Indonesia | Qualitative; case studies. Observations, documentation and interviews with the principal, deputy principal and teachers at SMPN 7 Mataram | Through supervision, motivation, specialization, MGMP activities and workshops, the application of servant leadership by school principals has been proven to improve teacher performance. This also increases discipline and effectiveness in building students' character |
| (Subhan et al., 2022) | Study of Servant Leadership in Building Educational Organizational Commitment at SDIT ABFA | Qualitative; case studies. Observation, Documentation and interviews | The servant leadership style applied by the school principal has a good impact on the commitment of teachers and education staff within the SDIT ABFA environment in -Pamekasan. This is done by the school principal in providing academic services, supervision, establishing persuasive communication, creating harmonious conditions in the school |

| Author Name (Publication Year) | Research Title | Research Type & Data Source | Results of Research and Assessment of Servant Leadership Practices in Schools |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | environment, and giving awards to teachers' achievements. |
| (Ahmad, 2023) | Perceived Servant Leadership Style of Principals Correlates with Job Satisfaction of Secondary School Teachers in Pakistan | Quantitative; Stratified random sampling. Participants; 510 Secondary School teachers in Pakistan | The application of servant leadership by the school principal provides benefits that support the school's main activities. Servant leadership facilitates interaction and entertains school employees and improves school organizational performance |
| (Demir, 2022) | The Role of Perceived Servant Leadership in Schools in Predicting Loyalty to Supervisor | Quantitative; Random Sampling. 202 teachers from 26 secondary schools in Diyarbakır province, Turkey | Servant leadership can encourage a significant increase in loyalty from school residents towards school supervisors. Loyalty in this context includes dedication, extra effort in work, attachment between school employees, as well as identification and internalization of the school's positive culture. |
| (Dami et al., 2022) | Servant Leadership and Life Satisfaction at Public School in Indonesia: Career Satisfaction as Mediator | Quantitative; structural equation modeling. 77 school principals and 366 teachers in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia | The implementation of servant leadership by school principals has positive and significant implications for teachers' careers and teachers' life satisfaction. Teacher career is a complementary mediator variable between servant |

| Author Name (Publication Year) | Research Title | Research Type & Data Source | Results of Research and Assessment of Servant Leadership Practices in Schools |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | leadership and teachers' life satisfaction. |
| (Ünsal & Usta, 2021) | Servant-leadership roles of principals on the work alienation perceptions of teachers | Quantitative; Survey Method. 484 teachers from elementary, middle and high school levels in Sanliurfa Province, Turkey | The implementation of servant leadership by the school principal is considered high by teachers. At the same time, their level of occupational alienation is low. |
| (Zulfikar, 2022) | The Relationship between the principal servant leadership and school productivity at Madrasah Aliyah in West Sumbawa | Quantitative; Survey Method. 54 respondents from school principals and teachers in West Sumbawa, Indonesia | The implementation of servant leadership by school principals shows a high correlation with school productivity in Madrasah Aliyah, West Sumbawa Regency. |
| (Wilian et al., 2020) | Servant Leadership Model as Catalyst in Strengthening Character Education; An Exploration Study of Principal's Leadership in Sumbawa Regency Indonesia | Qualitative; Multi-Case Study. Interviews with 4 school principals and observations of FGD activities of school principals and teachers | Weaknesses in implementing servant leadership in schools are the lack of detailed guidance, the potential for inconsistencies in leadership styles, and the complexity in measuring the impact of servant leadership on character education. |
| (Gultekin & Kara, 2022) | Servant Leadership Characteristics of School Teachers and Its Effect on Student Success and Organizational Health in Selected Public Schools | Quantitative; Survey Method. 1096 potential teacher participants in the selected public schools from Houston, Texas, in America | Servant leadership scores influence organizational performance. So to achieve efficient organizational performance, a high score is needed in the implementation of servant leadership |

**Discussion**

We review that there are various research findings and views regarding the implementation of servant leadership in schools. Of course, this cannot be separated from the objectives and topic areas of each research. However, in general, 10 of the 11 studies that we reviewed presented research results that confirmed the effectiveness of servant leadership, the positive implications of implementing servant leadership on aspects of school organization. Zhang & Liu (2023) found that servant leadership by school principals had a positive effect on teachers' emotional well-being through appreciative actions. Wiwik et al. (2023) highlighted the servant leadership of teachers towards students at Christian High School "X" Surabaya, stating the positive impact it had on the presentation of student involvement. Willian (2023) looked for the positive impact of servant leadership from school principals on teachers and students. For students, it is emphasized that this leadership style supports discipline and effective character formation.

In line with Zhang and Liu (2023), Subhan et al. (2022) found a positive impact of servant leadership applied by school principals on teachers. The difference is, if Zhang and Liu (2023) looked at the impact on teachers' emotional well-being, Subhan et al. (2022) looked at the impact on the commitment aspect of teachers and education staff in the SDIT ABFA Pamekasan environment. The qualitative case study approach in his research also explains that servant leadership is carried out by school principals through academic services, supervision, establishing persuasive communication, creating harmonious conditions in the school environment, and giving recognition to the achievements achieved by teachers.

Meanwhile, Ahmad, (2023) witnessed that the implementation of servant leadership in schools in Pakistan can support the main activities of schools, namely learning - besides being able to entertain teachers and educational staff. Demir (2022) found that servant leadership sparked the loyalty of school residents towards the school supervisor. Dami et al., (2022) revealed similar findings regarding the positive impact of servant leadership. However, these implications are more directed towards aspects of teacher careers - with teacher life satisfaction as a complementary variable between the two.

In another case, Ünsal and Usta (2021) found that the high implementation of servant leadership by school principals in teachers' perceptions was compared to the low level of job alienation of teachers. This is certainly good, because low alienation indicates that their emotional intensity with work is at a high level. At Madrasah Aliyah, West Sumbawa Regency, Zulfikar (2022) found the same research results as Ahmad (2023) in Pakistan. Meanwhile, Gultekin and Kara (2022) show their higher confidence in the effectiveness of servant leadership in schools. While other research only confirms the positive impact on certain aspects, Gultekin and Kara (2022) assure that to achieve efficient organizational performance, a high score is needed in the implementation of servant leadership.

From the 10 studies, we identified that implementing servant leadership in schools provides 12 benefits for teachers, students, education staff and school performance including; (1) Improving teachers' emotional well-being, (2) Navigating the challenges faced by schools due to the pandemic, (3) presentations of student involvement, (4) Improving teacher performance, (5) Increasing discipline and the effectiveness of student character formation, (6) Improving commitment of teachers and education staff (7) Supporting the main activities and

productivity of the school, (8) Facilitating interaction and entertaining school employees, (9) Improving the performance of the school organization, (10) Significantly increasing the loyalty of the school community towards the school supervisor, (11) Supporting teacher careers and teacher life satisfaction, as well as (12) Low levels of teacher job alienation.

The only research result that provides a different emphasis from all the research above is research by Wilian et al. (2020) which he conducted in Sumbawa Province, Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach with triangulation model data collection, Wilian et al. (2020) does not specifically highlight the application of certain leadership styles. Even though their paper is entitled "servant leadership", their study is an exploration that compares strategic leadership models applied by school principals in 4 schools at once as multi case-study in Sumbawa Regency, Indonesia by looking for each correlation with character education.

In our synthesis, they also attempted to provide a rigorous assessment of the leadership models identified. Of all the leadership styles of school principals studied, the treatment of school principals was found to be varied. However, in this diversity, Wilian et al. (2020) see that each of them has a tendency towards servant leadership. The research results they put forward were that the application of servant leadership made a positive contribution to character education. But there is a certain complexity in measuring it due to the lack of detailed guidance on the servant leadership they apply. In addition, there is the potential for inconsistency in leadership style.

The lack of detailed guidance for specific leadership practices in organizations does pose a high risk for organizational chaos. It is important to establish guidelines so that potential organizational chaos can be avoided (Syed Mohamad & Hauer, 2017). Moreover, servant leadership practices emphasize the power to serve. If the limits of authority of each member of the organization are biased, there is a tendency to shift power from the leader to the members of the organization. When organizational members exert greater influence on the leader's actions, this poses a threat of uncertainty in organizational performance (Gilani et al., 2018). The threat of chaos can be avoided by focusing on transforming professional practice (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016). One of them is referring to a detailed guide.


## CONCLUSION

A literature study of 11 selected articles examining the practice of servant leadership in schools from various countries in the world shows that the effective implementation of servant leadership in schools has 12 positive impacts on teachers, students, and the performance of school organizations which can be a strength in efforts to achieve school goals. However, additional literature exploration emphasizes the threat of school organizational chaos when the implementation of servant leadership is not supported by adequate detailed guidelines. To avoid this threat, we recommend that education policy-makers design and establish detailed guidelines on servant leadership in schools.

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