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Leading by Serving: Validating a Multidimensional Servant Leadership Model among Secondary School Principals

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Abstract

Servant leadership has received growing attention in educational leadership scholarship; however, empirical evidence validating its multidimensional and hierarchical structure remains limited, particularly in non-Western contexts. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates servant leadership as a second-order construct among secondary school principals in Sabah, Malaysia. Employing a quantitative cross-sectional research design, data were collected from 440 respondents using a structured survey instrument. The data were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with AMOS, and a second-order Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine the underlying structure of servant leadership. The proposed model comprised seven first-order dimensions: helping subordinates grow and succeed, building community, putting subordinates first, emotional healing, ethical behavior, conceptual skills, and empowerment. The results indicated an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.94$; CFI = .932; TLI = .921; RMSEA = .058), supporting the conceptualization of servant leadership as a higher-order construct. All seven dimensions loaded significantly onto the second-order factor ($\beta = .63-.74$, $p < .001$), with conceptual skills, empowerment, and ethical behavior emerging as the strongest contributors. The findings provide robust empirical support for the hierarchical nature of servant leadership and extend existing leadership theory within the Malaysian school context.

Keywords: Servant leadership; Educational leadership; School principals; Confirmatory factor analysis

1. Introduction

Despite its growing theoretical prominence, empirical validation of servant leadership—particularly as a multidimensional and higher-order construct—remains limited in non-Western educational contexts. Much of the existing literature is concentrated in Western school systems, raising concerns about contextual transferability, cultural relevance, and construct validity when applied to education systems in the Global South (Hallinger, 2018; Tian et al., 2022).

In Malaysia, school leadership reforms have been guided by the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025), which calls for transformational and values-driven leadership to enhance teaching quality and school effectiveness. However, leadership practices in Malaysian secondary schools continue to be shaped by bureaucratic accountability, centralized decision-making, and performance-driven evaluation systems, potentially constraining the enactment of servant-oriented leadership behaviors (Ismail et al., 2021). This tension highlights the need for empirical investigation into whether servant leadership is conceptually robust and practically observable within Malaysian school leadership.

Moreover, prior studies on servant leadership in education have largely relied on exploratory or first-order measurement models, offering limited insight into the structural coherence of the construct (Eva et al., 2019). There is a paucity of research employing second-order confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to validate servant leadership as a higher-order leadership architecture comprising interrelated dimensions such as empowerment, humility, ethical behavior, and community orientation.

Addressing these gaps, this study aims to reconceptualize servant leadership as a second-order construct and empirically validate its measurement model using AMOS. Drawing on data from Malaysian secondary school principals, this research responds directly to calls within educational leadership scholarship for methodologically rigorous, context-sensitive, and theory-building studies (Hallinger & Chen, 2015; Bush, 2020).

Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Is servant leadership empirically supported as a multidimensional, second-order construct among Malaysian secondary school principals?
2. Do the observed dimensions demonstrate satisfactory convergent and discriminant validity?
3. What are the implications of servant leadership as a leadership architecture for educational management and policy in Malaysia?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Servant Leadership in Educational Administration

Servant leadership is grounded in a moral and ethical philosophy that positions leadership as an act of service, whereby leaders prioritise the growth, well-being, and development of followers over personal authority or positional power (Greenleaf, 1977). Within educational administration, this leadership approach has gained increasing scholarly attention due to its alignment with the relational, ethical, and developmental demands of contemporary schooling environments. Empirical studies consistently associate servant leadership with positive educational outcomes, including teacher empowerment, organisational trust, professional

commitment, and the cultivation of collaborative and inclusive school cultures (van Dierendonck, 2011; Hoch et al., 2018).

In contrast to instructional leadership, which predominantly emphasises curriculum control, performance monitoring, and instructional supervision, servant leadership foregrounds relational influence, ethical stewardship, and human capacity building. This distinction is particularly salient in educational contexts characterised by policy reform pressures, increasing accountability demands, workforce diversity, and the emotional labour inherent in teaching and school leadership roles. As such, servant leadership offers a more holistic leadership framework that addresses both the technical and human dimensions of school administration (Crippen & Willows, 2019).

Moreover, servant leadership resonates strongly with contemporary educational governance discourses that emphasise shared leadership, professional autonomy, and values-based decision-making. By fostering trust, psychological safety, and collective responsibility, servant leaders are better positioned to navigate organisational complexity while sustaining long-term institutional effectiveness. These characteristics render servant leadership especially relevant for educational systems undergoing systemic transformation, such as those in many developing and Global South contexts.

2.2 Servant Leadership as a Multidimensional Construct

Contemporary servant leadership scholarship increasingly conceptualises the construct as inherently multidimensional, comprising interrelated behavioural, relational, and ethical dimensions. Commonly identified dimensions include empowerment, humility, authenticity, ethical behaviour, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship. Together, these dimensions reflect the comprehensive nature of servant leadership, encompassing moral conduct, follower development, relational sensitivity, and organisational responsibility.

Despite theoretical consensus on its multidimensionality, empirical research has often operationalised servant leadership by examining individual dimensions in isolation or by modelling them as correlated first-order constructs. Such approaches risk fragmenting the construct and obscuring the integrative leadership philosophy that servant leadership represents. Recent theoretical advancements argue that servant leadership is best conceptualised as a higher-order construct, wherein first-order dimensions collectively manifest an overarching leadership orientation rather than functioning as discrete, independent traits (Eva et al., 2019).

From a measurement perspective, modelling servant leadership as a second-order construct offers both theoretical and methodological advantages. Theoretically, it captures the holistic essence of servant leadership by recognising that behaviours such as empowerment, ethical conduct, emotional support, and conceptual competence are mutually reinforcing and jointly define servant-oriented leadership. Methodologically, higher-order modelling enhances construct validity and parsimony, allowing researchers to examine servant leadership as a unified latent construct while retaining the explanatory power of its constituent dimensions.

Emerging empirical evidence supports this hierarchical conceptualisation, demonstrating that dimensions related to ethical behaviour, empowerment, follower development, and leaders' conceptual skills contribute differentially yet substantively to the overarching servant leadership construct. This perspective aligns

with contemporary leadership theory, which increasingly acknowledges the interplay between moral, relational, and cognitive leadership capacities in complex organisational environments.

2.3 Research Gap

Despite the growing body of literature on servant leadership in education, several critical gaps remain evident. First, there is limited empirical application of second-order confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to validate servant leadership measurement models within educational settings. Many studies rely on first-order models, thereby underutilising advanced structural equation modelling techniques that can more accurately reflect the construct's hierarchical nature.

Second, servant leadership research remains disproportionately concentrated in Western contexts, with comparatively limited representation from Asian and Global South educational systems. This imbalance constrains the generalisability of existing findings and overlooks the cultural, organisational, and policy-specific dynamics that may shape leadership enactment in non-Western settings.

Third, there is insufficient empirical alignment between servant leadership theory and national education reform agendas, particularly in systems emphasising values-based leadership, ethical governance, and capacity building. Addressing this gap is essential for ensuring the contextual relevance and practical utility of servant leadership frameworks in educational administration.

In response to these gaps, the present study seeks to validate servant leadership as a second-order construct within Malaysian secondary schools using robust structural equation modelling techniques. By doing so, the study contributes to both the theoretical refinement and contextual expansion of servant leadership research in education.

2.4 Research Questions and Hypotheses

Grounded in the theoretical positioning of servant leadership as a multidimensional and hierarchical construct, this study is guided by the premise that servant leadership is best represented as a higher-order latent variable manifested through interrelated first-order dimensions. Drawing on prior conceptual and empirical scholarship, the present study adopts a second-order confirmatory factor analytic approach to examine whether key servant leadership dimensions collectively and substantively represent an overarching servant leadership construct within the context of educational administration.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Does the proposed second-order servant leadership model demonstrate an adequate fit within the context of Malaysian secondary schools?

RQ2: Do the first-order dimensions of servant leadership load significantly onto the higher-order servant leadership construct?

Based on these research questions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: The second-order servant leadership measurement model will demonstrate satisfactory model fit indices, indicating an acceptable representation of servant leadership as a higher-order construct.

H2: All first-order dimensions of servant leadership will exhibit significant and substantial standardised factor loadings on the higher-order servant leadership construct.

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, with data analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) through AMOS. The sample consisted of 440 secondary school teachers in Sabah, Malaysia, selected using stratified random sampling to ensure regional representativeness. These teachers served as respondents who evaluated their respective principals based on the principals' servant leadership practices demonstrated in their schools. The servant leadership instrument was adapted from established and validated scales and contextualised to suit the Malaysian school setting, with items measured using a five-point Likert scale. Data analysis involved first-order and second-order Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), followed by the assessment of model fit indices, including CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and χ^2/df , as well as the evaluation of convergent and discriminant validity using Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The application of second-order CFA was theoretically justified to capture the hierarchical structure of servant leadership as conceptualised in prior literature.

4. Results

4.1 Measurement Model Fit

The second-order CFA demonstrated good model fit, indicating that servant leadership is appropriately represented as a higher-order construct.

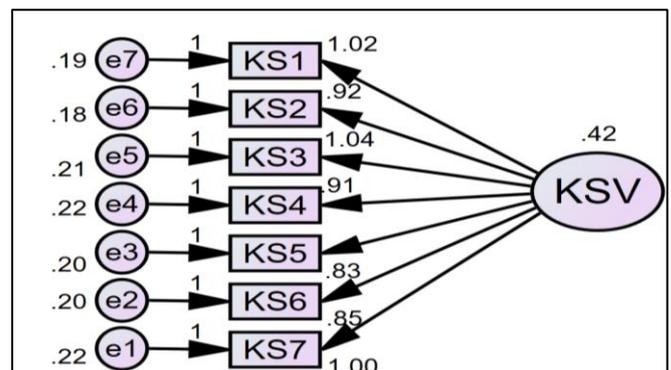


Figure 1. Second-Order CFA Model of Servant Leadership

Table 1. Model Fit Indices for Second-Order CFA

Fit Index	Recommended	Obtained Value	Interpretation
χ^2/df	< 5.0	2.94	Acceptable
CFI	$\geq .90$.932	Good
TLI	$\geq .90$.921	Good
RMSEA	$\leq .08$.058	Good

Table 2. Standardised Factor Loadings (Second-Order Model)

First-Order Dimension (Observed Constructs)	Standardised Factor Loading (β)	Interpretation
Helping Subordinates Grow and Succeed (KS1)	.70	Strong contribution to servant leadership
Building Community (KS2)	.65	Moderate to strong contribution
Putting Subordinates	.63	Moderate

First (KS3)		contribution
Emotional Healing (KS4)	.66	Moderate to strong contribution
Ethical Behaviour (KS5)	.70	Strong contribution
Conceptual Skills (KS6)	.74	Strongest contribution
Empowerment (KS7)	.72	Strong contribution

All factor loadings are statistically significant at $p < .005$. The second-order CFA model demonstrates acceptable construct validity, confirming servant leadership as a higher-order latent construct represented by seven first-order dimensions. The CR and AVE values confirm internal consistency and construct validity.

Table 3. Construct Reliability and Validity

Construct	CR	AVE
Servant Leadership	.91	.67

5. Discussion

The present study provides robust empirical support for conceptualising servant leadership as a multidimensional higher-order construct. The second-order confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated a satisfactory model fit, as indicated by acceptable χ^2/df (2.94), strong incremental fit indices (CFI = .932; TLI = .921), and a low RMSEA value (.058). Collectively, these indices meet or exceed commonly accepted thresholds, thereby confirming the adequacy of the hypothesised measurement model and supporting the structural coherence of servant leadership as a higher-order construct.

At the construct level, all first-order dimensions exhibited standardised factor loadings above the recommended minimum threshold of .60, indicating that each dimension contributes meaningfully to the overarching servant leadership construct. Among these, Conceptual Skills emerged as the strongest contributor ($\beta = .74$), suggesting that leaders' cognitive ability to understand organisational complexities, anticipate future challenges, and integrate strategic thinking plays a central role in the enactment of servant leadership. This finding extends prior servant leadership literature by highlighting that servant-oriented leadership is not solely relational or moral in nature, but also deeply rooted in leaders' conceptual and analytical competencies.

Similarly, Empowerment ($\beta = .72$) and Ethical Behaviour ($\beta = .70$) demonstrated strong contributions, reinforcing the argument that servant leadership is fundamentally anchored in empowering followers and upholding ethical standards. These dimensions reflect leaders' commitment to fostering autonomy, shared decision-making, and moral responsibility, which are consistently identified as core tenets of servant leadership across cultural and organisational contexts. The strong loading of ethical behaviour further underscores the normative foundation of servant leadership, positioning moral conduct as an indispensable element rather than a peripheral attribute.

In addition, Helping Subordinates Grow and Succeed ($\beta = .70$) registered a strong loading, emphasising the developmental orientation inherent in servant leadership. This finding aligns with theoretical assertions that servant leaders prioritise follower growth, capability building, and long-term personal development.

Meanwhile, Emotional Healing ($\beta = .66$) and Building Community ($\beta = .65$) exhibited moderate to strong contributions, highlighting the importance of emotional support and relational connectedness in sustaining effective servant leadership practices. These dimensions reflect the relational depth of servant leadership, particularly in fostering trust, psychological safety, and a sense of belonging within organisations.

Although Putting Subordinates First recorded the lowest loading among the dimensions ($\beta = .63$), it remained above the acceptable threshold, confirming its relevance within the overall construct. This comparatively lower loading may suggest that prioritising subordinates' needs is enacted in more nuanced or context-dependent ways, possibly mediated by organisational norms or leadership structures. Nevertheless, its statistical adequacy reaffirms its role as a defining characteristic of servant leadership.

Overall, the findings substantiate the multidimensional and hierarchical nature of servant leadership, demonstrating that both relational-moral and cognitive-strategic dimensions jointly define the construct. By empirically validating a second-order model, this study advances servant leadership research by offering a more integrated and parsimonious measurement framework. Practically, the results suggest that leadership development initiatives should not only emphasise ethical conduct and follower-centred behaviours but also strengthen leaders' conceptual and strategic capabilities to effectively embody servant leadership in complex organisational environments.

6. Implications

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This study extends servant leadership theory by providing empirical validation of a seven-dimensional second-order model within a Malaysian school context. The findings support Greenleaf's foundational proposition that servant leadership is not a unidimensional moral stance, but a complex leadership framework integrating strategic, ethical, relational, and developmental elements. The validated model contributes to the growing body of international literature advocating servant leadership as a robust theoretical lens for educational leadership research.

6.2 Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that leadership development programmes for principals should move beyond technical and managerial competencies to emphasise emotional intelligence, teacher well-being, and relational leadership skills. Structured professional development focusing on mentoring, coaching, and emotional support mechanisms could strengthen weaker servant leadership dimensions, particularly emotional healing and prioritising subordinates.

6.3 Policy Implications

At the policy level, the results underscore the importance of embedding servant leadership principles within national leadership standards and evaluation frameworks. Education authorities may consider integrating servant leadership indicators into principal appraisal systems, ensuring a balanced emphasis on instructional outcomes and human-centred leadership practices.

7. Conclusion

This study provides compelling empirical evidence that servant leadership among school principals is a multidimensional construct encompassing seven core dimensions. The second-order CFA

confirms the robustness of the measurement model and highlights conceptual skills, empowerment, and ethical behaviour as dominant leadership strengths. However, comparatively weaker performance in emotional healing and prioritising subordinates signals the need for more holistic leadership development.

By illuminating both strengths and gaps in servant leadership practices, this study contributes valuable insights for theory, practice, and policy. Ultimately, strengthening servant leadership in schools holds significant potential for enhancing teacher professionalism, organisational trust, and sustained academic excellence.

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