

An Evaluation of Teachers Opinions about the Servant Leadership Behaviours of School Principals: A Critical Review

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This is a review of ‘An Evaluation of Teachers’ Opinions about the Servant Leadership Behaviours of School Principals’ published in Educational Process: International Journal. That article delves into how school teachers perceive the implementation of the ‘Servant Leadership Behaviours’ concept by school principals, where teachers serve under these principals’ supervision. It also identifies the level of this concept’s application in primary and secondary schools. The article has strengths and weaknesses. The concept of servant leadership by school principals is well-explained and it effectively employs methodology (snowball sampling and content analysis). It systematises data, succeeds in answering the research questions, and its references are compatible with bibliographic rules. But the article lacks a research problem statement or review of past studies, has a shallow and unorganised introduction, and only vaguely distinguishes data analysis from its overall conclusion. Finally, the current review identifies the article’s positives for readers despite its few weaknesses.

Key words: *Servant Leadership Behaviours, school principals, snowball sampling, content analysis, school teachers, school management.*

Contribution/Originality

This review's principal contribution is in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the aforementioned research article ("the article" or "the research paper"). Simultaneously, this review also directs the readers in recognising the significant ideas put forth in the article. Such ideas are about understanding the importance of Servant Leadership practised by principals within an academic setting, while suggesting a list of characteristics that school principals should demonstrate when adhering to Servant Leadership guidelines. This review concludes by proposing the incorporation of the research paper's findings, in courses and seminars conducted for school principals and teachers; a potentially valuable aid for the Ministry of Education in Malaysia.

Background

'An Evaluation of Teachers' Opinions about the Servant Leadership Behaviours of School Principals' was written by Robert Insley (USA), Paula Jaeger (USA), Abdurrahman Ekinci (Turkey) and Halis Sakiz (Turkey). It is an academic article published in *Education Process: International Journal* (EDUPIJ/VOL 5/ ISSUE 3/ FALL/ 2016). The article is about the concept of servant leadership behaviours, applied by school principals towards school teachers, as well as the expectations of school teachers apropos of the aforementioned concept by school principals.

To research this concept, the teachers' perception of the subject matter became the focus of the article. The extent to which this concept is applied by the principals, in both primary and secondary schools, was evaluated according to teachers' perceptions, which function as the key data and central analysis of the article. The current review mainly analyses the article, to appreciate the positive contributions made by the research while giving constructive comments to remedy any pronounced weaknesses found in the study.

Evaluation of the Article's Strengths and Weaknesses

Generally, the article is systematic, organised, and well-written academic research. The consistent focus on the subject discussed in the article allows the fluid presentation of its points. Its main ideas are canvassed at length. Nevertheless, there are a few weaknesses within the article which can be reviewed to enhance its quality.

Strengths

Concept Construction

In research, the way a concept is written plays a significant role in describing the subject of the research. Syed Arabi Idid (1998) defined a concept as an abstract explanation of a subject matter in various dimensions. These dimensions, or points of view, can be formed or

determined according to the preference of the researcher or the aim of the research (Bailey, 1978). However, it is imperative that the concept, which is conceived via different dimensions, closely relate to the matter being explained (Azirah Hashim, 2005). Description of a concept is important in research, because it provides a better comprehension of the subject matter to which it is also a guide; it also enables the researcher to conduct and produce a higher quality analysis (Syed Arabi Idid, 1998).

Concept construction in any study should be based on the research itself. This step is crucial in excluding information that is unrelated or irrelevant to the research objectives. Concepts are not novel for humans since they are exposed to various concepts in their social life. Lawrence Newman (2007) averred that there is a high possibility that a concept derives from neither the experience nor the education of a person. Hence, any concept constructed of this nature cannot be interpreted as a research concept, due to the difficulty one might face in establishing a systematic and academic explanation. As asserted by Syed Arabi Idid (1998), systematic and academic explanations are pivotal in research. Thus, forming an academic concept is an infusion of daily life experience and academic knowledge (Newman, 2007; Sitorus, 2018).

Based on the former discussion about concept formation, this review of the article reveals a clear explanation about the concept of Servant Leadership. The explanation is included in the introductory part of the article, from pages 224 to 226. The first paragraph contains a general explanation about the administration and management system in a workplace. The concepts of leader and worker are intelligibly emphasised; the ways in which the perceptions of these two concepts metamorphosed through time are narrated well. This discussion founds the concept construction of Servant Leadership in the article.

The concept of Servant Leadership presented in the paper is divided into ‘leadership’ and ‘servant’. After defining these terms, the article explains their opposition, which is indispensable in highlighting the core of its research. For instance, one finding of the research reported in the article states that school principals do not possess a clear grasp of the true characteristics of Servant Leadership. The fact that Servant Leadership is not a common management system, in business or other fields of management or administration, is stated as one possible reason for these principals’ failure to understand the concept well. By providing an accurate and detailed definition, the article’s authors have clearly interpreted the concept of Servant Leadership, which benefits those in the fields of management who operate on its values, especially in schools and educational institutions.

In explaining the research concept, the article’s authors have differentiated Servant Leadership from other leaderships, by accentuating the fact that prioritising the needs of followers and practising good moral values are two pillars that build the concept. This

explanation is achieved by contrasting different leaderships. For example, in paragraph five, the authors mention that Transformational Leadership is stated to give importance to the organisation's objectives while Servant Leadership gives importance to the followers. With this juxtapose, the authors have succeeded in providing a comprehensive account of the differences between the two forms of leadership. These differences also highlight the prominent features of Servant Leadership to the reader (Subair & Oriogu 2016).

Moreover, the authors of the article have enumerated the ethical values or qualities that should be possessed by a leader who practises Servant Leadership in his/her administration, based on the theories suggested by multiple researchers. Although the values and qualities vary slightly from one researcher to another, several elements persist in all the theories: serving the organisation/community, being confident, showing care, instilling confidence in followers, listening actively, behaving modestly, and having an ambitious and affectionate personality. The introduction of the article concludes with the explanation of five requisite qualities in a leader, which govern Servant Leadership in schools: empathy, altruistic behaviours, humility, integrity and justice. The multifaceted qualities and values discussed in relation to Servant Leadership enable the readers to have a crystalline idea of the concept and its realisations. The discussion also stands as the strength of the article.

Methodology

Another strength of the article lies in its use of snowball method in its research methodology. The crucial element in snowball method is the concept of 'key informants' or 'respondents' who have direct information about the research issue. Through several key informants, other respondents can be identified with ease. This method aids the selection of suitable respondents who have in-depth knowledge about the subject of a research, while eliminating other problems (Bailey, 1978). By incorporating this method, the authors of the reviewed article have identified which respondents are experienced and have comprehensive knowledge about Servant Leadership values.

The snowball sampling method employed by the article's authors allows them to identify twelve teachers serving in schools in Turkey. The teachers have worked for periods ranging from four years to 22 years. The working experience attests to the logical perceptions and reasonable expectations of teachers on school principals' implementation of Servant Leadership. Greenbaum (1998), in 'The Handbook for Focus Group Research', has advocated that a group of respondents comprising six to 12 participants is very effective in gathering data via group interviews, due to its ability to enable the researcher to control the interview of the research subject. Using Greenbaum's suggestion, the authors of the article have chosen seven primary school teachers and five secondary school teachers, to ensure the collection of perceptions and expectations of teachers from both levels of schools. The authors further

describe the same respondents as eight males and four females, to indicate a mixture of both sexes in data collection.

Under the topic of Methodology, the researchers have explained that the snowball sampling method guided them well in identifying which respondents are suitable and qualified for the research. The authors have also narrated the process of snowball sampling they utilised in the research, starting from identifying the first respondent. They have drawn attention to the systematic data collection since the beginning of the research, owing to the snowball sampling method. Through this method the researchers are able to filter the teachers, and eliminate those who cannot contribute to the research, resulting in a successful data collection.

Steered by the advice of a local school district manager, the researchers of the study identified several teachers suitable for their research. Then, these teachers were asked to propose other teachers who could participate in the research. This process was repeated until the twelfth respondent was identified.

The authors also explain that they have prepared a pamphlet-like text about Servant Leadership for the respondents, as this technique is believed to effectively activate the respondents' mind while making them cognisant of the research subject. Then, a systematic and organised two-hour interview session, recorded by note-taking in compliance with the respondents' preference, was conducted to gather information from them. The face-to-face focused group interview utilised in this research has many positive aspects for the researchers. It yields multi-angled views from the respondents, allows the researchers to be informed and to discuss the respondents' varied views, lets the researchers obtain examples of real-life experiences from the respondents, and grants more comfort to both the researchers and the respondents during group discussion. These attributes make the authors' choice of methodology very appropriate and more practical.

In addition to methods of data collection, the authors of the article also describe the content analysis method, the strategy adopted to analyse the data. This method is advocated as a potent step for reviewing the collected data and reproducing them in the form of an analysis. During the analysis, the content analysis method is known to aid the researcher in identifying the concept, a vital matter to research as mentioned previously, and to help the researcher connect the concept and the data; simultaneously, meanings are also assigned to the data (Hodder, 1994). Furthermore, both the implicit and explicit subject matter can be unearthed from the data via content analysis, while providing the researchers ample space for multidimensional interpretations (Firmin, 2008 & Sillalee, 2017; Sunar & Shaari 2017). So, the use of content analysis by the authors of this article can be deemed another of its strengths.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The systematic presentation and academic analysis of data have been well-executed in the article, which can be added as one of its strengths. From pages 229 to 230, the authors have presented their findings in two different tables, which have comprehensible and academic organisation. The tables are followed by detailed explanations and the main finding for the first research question, in which the authors clearly state that the school principals do not implement Servant Leadership according to the way in which the concept is defined. To support this finding, an extract from the interview transcript of a teacher, identified as Participant A, is included on page 231. The extract demonstrates the teacher's opinion about his/her school principal, who does not have the qualities prescribed by Servant Leadership. The teacher emphasises considerable distance between his/her principals and the teachers of that school.

Further lack of Servant Leadership qualities in the principal of Participant A's school is described in the extract as well. The principal's misplaced importance on documentation while ignoring the needs of both the teachers and education is revealed in the extract. The principal him/herself is described as paying more attention to the teachers' obligations, being more theoretical, failing to build diplomatic relationships with teachers in the school due to minimal socialisation, and venturing out of his office only very infrequently. The diminishing relationship between the principal and the school teachers in Participant A's school is evident from an incident where only two of the approximately 45 to 50 teachers of the school attended the wedding of the principal's son although the invitation was extended to all the teachers in the school. Apart from that, on page 232 (the first paragraph) under the sub-topic of conclusion and discussion, three teachers affirm that their principal has never shown any Servant Leadership quality.

Research Findings

Based on the statements and views of the teachers, the authors answer their first research question, which is about the circumstances in which the school administrators perform the behavioural and emotional features of Servant Leadership, by stating that the school principals in Turkey do not have a clear grasp on the values of Servant Leadership and they never/seldom implement the values in their administration.

The second research question, which is about the kind of behavioural and emotional approaches that a teacher thinks a school administrator can/should perform in the scope of Servant Leadership at their school, is answered with the suggestions accumulated from the teachers during the interview. The respondents hope their principal will demonstrate

friendliness, show warmth, give respect, treat all teachers equally, provide support and encouragement for the teachers' efforts, take care of the teachers' needs, delegate the tasks fairly among all teachers without displaying any favouritism, behave ethically and show empathy. These detailed suggestions indicate that the authors' data analysis has guided prominently their research questions.

References

The reviewed article is laden with many references that relate to the research subject; another strong point of the article. Although the research is executed in the form of field work, these copious references solidify the article. Many books and multiple articles are referred to, in order to perfect this article, which points to the comprehensive explorations performed by the authors in writing the research paper.

The authors also referred to many books and articles to perfect their article. With this we can know that the authors dived deep into the subject of their research with many reading materials. References like 'The Leadership Experience' by Richard L. Draft (2001), 'Focus on Leadership: Servant Leadership for the 21st Century' by Stephen Covey (2002), 'Development of the School Principals Servant Leadership Behavior Scale and Evaluation of Servant Leadership Behavior according to Teachers' by Abdurrahman Ekinici (2015), and 'Servant Leadership: A Theoretical Model' by Kathleen A. Patterson (2003) are, to name a few of the large collection of work, used as references to produce this article. They are highly relevant to the research.

It should be noted that most of the references used in the article are from recent publications. For example, the article entitled 'Development of the School Principals Servant Leadership Behavior Scale and Evaluation of Servant Leadership Behavior According to teachers' by Abdurrahman Ekinici was published in 2015. This shows the careful consideration and updated knowledge of the authors with regards to current trends in their research field. In addition, the readers gain more benefits by using these references as a guide to keep abreast of the developments in the field of Servant Leadership. Thus, the references presented in the article become another strength that enhances the quality of the work.

Weaknesses/ Limitation

Even though the article demonstrates its strengths in well-constructed concepts, comprehensively presented research findings and currently published references, the authors fail to shed focus on a few aspects, which become the limitations or weaknesses of the article. In the scope of academic writing, these weaknesses are considered to be serious errors.

Problem Statement

A vague problem statement is a main weakness of the article. Due to its obscurity, the problem statement of the research is hard to identify, despite the article mentioning it on page 225. The authors have explained the differences between Servant Leadership and Ethical Leadership, in addition to emphasising the need for school principals to understand these differences. Hence, the problem statement for this research can be interpreted as investigating the degree of comprehension that school principals have towards the differences between Servant Leadership and Ethical Leadership, which the authors fail to state clearly in the article.

Fundamentally, a problem statement in research paper gives a researcher a subject matter to study and produce possible solutions via his/her research (Rosinah Edinin, 2012; Supian & Ab 2018). Thus, identifying the problem statement is the pre-requisite for any research (Ranjit Kumar, 2011). Syed Arabi Idid (1998) further proclaims the significance of the problem statement by saying that determining it prior to the research enables a researcher to create a focus in his/her research field (Syed Arabi Idid, 1998). The problem statement also explains the research topic, which becomes decisive in generating accurate aims for research while governing its scope (Rosinah Edinin, 2012).

Despite the clear research aims stated in the article reviewed here, the construction of research aims based on an apparent problem statement would have solidified the article further. The lack of clarity in stating the problem statement has to be viewed as a weakness under the principles of academic writing.

Past Studies

The past studies are actually published accounts that provide an inventory of the previous investigations by researchers and academics in a certain field (Norzan Mohd Noor, 2011). Thus, the absence of past studies in the literature review is another aspect that the authors of the article have failed to address. Lawrence Neuman (2003) mentioned that before beginning research, producing a literature review, including reviewing the past studies, is mandatory for identifying and stabilising the proposed subject of the research. This step also serves as a guide that leads to the current research (Ranjit Kumar, 2011; Tong, et al. 2017).

Reviewing past studies allows a researcher to “establish and internalize the existing body of knowledge in the field” (Lawrence Neuman, 2003). This step is important in differentiating the current research from past studies, and depicting how the current research can contribute to the field of its study (Ranjit Kumar, 2011). Moreover, past studies are also essential in relating the current research to the contemporary knowledge in its field (Norman Blaikie, 2010).

Essentially, the past studies help a researcher determine if he/she could continue the research, especially if past findings might resemble potential results from the current research (Corrine Glesne, 2011). Moreover, the review of past studies can enlighten a researcher about the right direction for his/her research (Kamarul Zaman bin Ahmad, 2007).

Therefore the lack of past studies in the article is a severe weakness. The most important criterion of any academic work is a detailed review of studies in the related field. However, despite the length of references provided in the article, its failure to state past studies cannot be overlooked and must be highlighted.

Introduction

The introduction to the reviewed article emphasises the construction of the research's concepts. The authors have included a general perception of leadership, and then a construction of the Servant Leadership concept. Thus, concept construction takes precedence in the introduction, which is another limitation or weakness of the article. That is not to suggest that the introduction should not mention concept construction. It only states that if the introduction is outweighed by a formation of concept, the authors would not have the opportunity to include other aspects of research that should be incorporated in an introduction, as prescribed by the conventions of academic writing.

An introduction to a research article should encompass the central question of the research. It should also guide a researcher to keep the research within its scope, and guide a reader to the main objectives of the research. As well, the introduction must inform the readers about the advantages of reading the said article. Therefore, an introduction to a research article functions as the background that describes the research itself (Scott R. Harris, 2013).

Before writing an introduction for a research article, a few questions should be addressed. They are:

- I. What is my research?
- II. Why is my topic important to be researched about?
- III. What do I know about my research topic before I start the analysis?
- IV. How does this research give new contribution to the existing body of knowledge in the field?

(Adopted from: <http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/introduction>)

Answering the above questions directs the research. The article becomes more trustworthy, with the ability to hook the readers' interest to encourage them to continue reading the article.



However, by devoting a large portion of the introduction to the construction of Servant Leadership concept, the article loses an effective introduction and obscures the framework of the whole article, which is one of its serious weaknesses.

Conclusion and Discussion

The Conclusion and Discussion on page 232 elucidates yet another weakness of the reviewed article. Discussion in a research paper provides a platform for a researcher to build logical and academic answers for his/her research questions, which are based on the main aims of the research. Hence, lengthy deliberations are a norm in the Discussion of a research article. Justifications for research findings are also included here, mostly in the form of examples, to strengthen them. So, it should be said that the heading of discussion in a research article explains the research (Hennie Boeije, 2009).

Under the heading of a Conclusion, a researcher presents the most important research findings briefly and concisely. Examples and detailed explanations are eliminated, to observe the writing conventions for the Conclusion of a research article (Robert Yin, 2011). Nonetheless, the Conclusion of the reviewed article in question does not adhere to the conventions. Some views from the respondents are still evident in it. Infusing discussion and conclusion into one heading, as found in the article, might confuse the readers and complicate their comprehension of the research findings, which should be perspicuous. Separating the discussion and conclusion is recommended, to help overcome this identified limitation or weakness.

The Implications of Reading this Article within the Context of Malaysian Schools

Generally, this is a well-written article that carefully constructs Servant Leadership. The formation of this concept has been described with clear organisation of the article. Additionally, its authors have referred to many specialist works in this field, the scholarship of which results in reliable and strong statements delivered under the discussion of the Servant Leadership concept. With reference to schools, this article provides a compendious account about the concept to the school principals. Only a handful of them have clear and in-depth ideas about Service Leadership behaviours.

The major reason for only a small number of principals understanding the concept of Service Leadership in Malaysia is that many possess a degree in neither management nor administration. School principals in Malaysia are frequently former school teachers with a diploma, a basic degree or a master's degree in education, who have advanced on the basis of their years of service. Their theoretical knowledge regarding management is often obtained through various courses and workshops organised by the Ministry of Education. Most



principals learn about school management from the experiences of their seniors. Thus, the reviewed article provides a good explanation about Servant Leadership to these school principals, and stresses its importance in managing the schools.

School teachers can be aided in their understanding of Servant Leadership, by reading the article. Although not a part of higher management in a school, these teachers have chances to be elected as project leaders or administrators of other departments in a school or other academic institutes. Thence, a strong grasp of Servant Leadership is vital in building their self-confidence and expanding their knowledge about management. Besides, it should be noted that as current school teachers, the possibility that they will be promoted to school principals in the future is relatively high.

The results of the research and the suggestions presented in the article can prompt the school principals to build a better relationship with their staff. Lack of good relationships between a school principal and his/her teachers, with reference to the incident about the wedding of the principal's son mentioned previously, explicit indicates that teachers do not have a good relationship or respect towards their principals and vice versa.

The findings of this research can inspire principals to evaluate themselves, based on the management and administration system they practice in their school. This can provide the opportunity for these principals to deliberate on their weaknesses in the management system at their schools, and adopt the Servant Leadership concept.

Apart from that, respondents' suggestions, regarding their expectations in a school principal's display of Servant Leadership behaviours in school, can be regarded as the principals' guide. Teachers' expectations that their principals will be friendly, warm, respectful, fair in how they treat teachers, support and encourage their efforts, look after their needs, divide tasks fairly, and be ethical and understanding, are common traits of Servant Leadership applicable in any school around the globe.

The implementation by school principals, of Servant Leadership behaviours as presented in the article, can alleviate school principals' burden of managing schools. It can also help principals to form closer relationships with their teachers. This is also crucial in cultivating dynamic students. Any conflict between a principal and the teachers of a school impedes teaching and learning, due to the emotional turbulence faced by both parties. The chances of wrong conclusions and inappropriate decisions in school administration are very high. Thus, it is very important that there is a good relationship between principals and their teachers in schools.



The article can also be utilised as a great source in conducting any course or seminar for school principals, as respondents in the research itself suggest. Usually the Ministry of Education in Malaysia holds various courses and seminars for school teachers and principals, to elevate their knowledge in multiple fields pertaining to schools and education in general. Using the article as one source for any course or seminar will be fruitful, as this can provide sufficient exposure to the parties involved in helping them understand the concept of Servant Leadership.

Conclusion of the Review

Despite the weaknesses identified in the introduction and conclusion, as well as the lack of past studies and a clear problem statement, this is a well-written article. The strengths of the article are more pronounced in its detailed concept explanation, comprehensive analysis and articulation of the appropriate methodology for the research. In conclusion, this is an impactful article for readers, especially for teachers and principals. The article could help them understand the key elements of Servant Leadership and its prominence in its implementation in an academic institute, namely schools. Finally, it should be noted that the article leaves room for other researchers to conduct parallel research such as this in many countries around the world, including Malaysia.

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