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Servant Leadership dalam Penguatan Budaya Sekolah Humanis: Analisis Konseptual dalam Konteks Merdeka Belajar

Servant Leadership in Strengthening a Humanistic School Culture: A Conceptual Analysis in the Merdeka Belajar Context

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Kata Kunci: servant leadership; budaya sekolah humanis; Merdeka Belajar; kepemimpinan sekolah; Indonesia

Abstrak

Artikel ini menganalisis secara konseptual kontribusi servant leadership terhadap penguatan budaya sekolah humanis serta relevansinya bagi pendidikan Indonesia dan Merdeka Belajar. Penelitian menggunakan studi kepustakaan integratif untuk mensintesis prinsip-prinsip servant leadership, menganalisis kaitannya dengan relasi interpersonal, iklim sekolah inklusif, dan internalisasi nilai humanis, serta memetakan relevansinya bagi konteks Indonesia tanpa mengklaim evaluasi empiris pada sekolah tertentu. Sumber kajian meliputi karya teoritik, artikel ilmiah, studi terkait Indonesia, dan dokumen kebijakan pendidikan yang dianalisis melalui analisis isi dan analisis tematik. Sintesis menunjukkan tiga jalur utama: relasi egaliter dan empatik, iklim sekolah inklusif dan kolaboratif, serta internalisasi nilai melalui keteladanan, partisipasi, dan pembiasaan. Dalam konteks Indonesia, prinsip-prinsip tersebut selaras secara konseptual dengan pembelajaran berpusat pada murid, pemberdayaan guru, gotong royong, musyawarah, dan fleksibilitas kontekstual. Studi lapangan tetap diperlukan untuk menguji implementasinya.

Keywords: servant leadership; humanistic school culture; Merdeka Belajar; school leadership; Indonesia

Abstract

This article conceptually analyzes how servant leadership may strengthen a humanistic school culture and its relevance to Indonesian education and Merdeka Belajar. Using an integrative library-research design, the study synthesizes servant-leadership principles, analyzes their links with interpersonal relationships, inclusive school climate, and the internalization of humanistic values, and maps their relevance to Indonesia without claiming empirical evaluation in a particular school. The review draws on foundational theory, peer-reviewed studies, Indonesia-related literature, and educational policy documents examined through content and thematic analysis. The synthesis identifies three pathways: egalitarian and empathetic relationships, inclusive and collaborative school climates, and value internalization through role modelling, participation, and habituation. In Indonesia, these principles are conceptually compatible with learner-centered education, teacher agency, gotong royong, musyawarah, and contextual flexibility. Field-based case studies and ethnographic research remain necessary to test how these propositions are enacted in practice.

INTRODUCTION

School culture constitutes an important foundation for shaping the character, climate, and developmental direction of educational institutions. In a humanistic school, leadership must foreground dignity, empathy, participation, and the development of both students and teachers. Servant leadership offers a useful conceptual framework because it places service, ethical responsibility, listening, empowerment, and community building at the center of leadership. In this article, however, servant leadership is not treated as an observed practice in a particular school; it is examined through published scholarship in order to clarify the pathways through which it may strengthen a humanistic school culture.

Urgency of the Problem

In many educational institutions, school culture remains shaped by authoritarian, instructional, and top-down leadership patterns. Such patterns can create rigid relationships among principals, teachers, and students and may inhibit trust and collaboration. In the Indonesian context, this concern is especially relevant to the policy orientation of Merdeka Belajar, which emphasizes learner agency, contextual learning, and greater professional space for educators. Servant leadership is therefore important to examine not as a ready-made imported model, but as a leadership framework whose principles must be interpreted in relation to local educational culture, institutional accountability, and the need for participatory school communities. [1]

Review of Previous Studies

Several studies have examined the relationship between servant leadership and school climate. Eva et al. report that servant leadership has a positive influence on teacher engagement and job satisfaction. Liden et al. developed a measurement model of servant leadership for educational and social-organizational contexts. In Indonesia, Suyatno et al. found that servant leadership contributes to strengthening student character through the exemplary conduct of school leaders. Collectively, these studies indicate that servant leadership can foster healthier working and learning environments. However, most studies have focused primarily on performance or motivation rather than on the formation of a humanistic school culture as an integrated system of values. This leaves room for further inquiry into how the implementation of servant-leadership values actually shapes a humanistic school culture as experienced by the entire school community. [2]

Limitations of Previous Studies

Although previous studies demonstrate the positive potential of servant leadership, several limitations remain. First, much of the literature emphasizes individual outcomes such as motivation, engagement, or

[1] Greenleaf, 1977; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002.

[2] Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2014; Suyatno et al., 2019.

performance rather than the formation of a humanistic school culture as an integrated system. Second, survey-based designs frequently offer limited insight into how leadership values are negotiated in everyday interactions. Third, the cultural and policy contexts of Indonesia remain underrepresented in the international literature. These gaps point to two different research needs: empirical case studies or ethnographies are required to investigate lived implementation, while conceptual synthesis is required to translate international evidence into a coherent framework relevant to Indonesia. Because the present study is library research, it addresses only the second need. It does not claim to observe principals or school communities directly; empirical case-study and ethnographic work remains necessary as a subsequent research agenda. [3]

Research Objectives

This study aims to develop a conceptual synthesis of servant leadership for strengthening a humanistic school culture. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) identify and synthesize servant-leadership principles that are consistently associated in the literature with supportive educational environments; (2) analyze the conceptual mechanisms through which these principles may contribute to empathetic relationships, inclusive collaboration, and the internalization of humanistic values; (3) examine the contextual relevance of these mechanisms to Indonesian education, particularly the orientation of Merdeka Belajar; and (4) formulate implications and propositions that can guide future empirical case studies or ethnographic research. Accordingly, the study does not evaluate the actual implementation or causal impact of servant leadership in a specific school.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The adoption of servant leadership in educational institutions is increasingly recognized as a transformative approach to cultivating a humanistic school culture - one rooted in empathy, respect, and collective growth. Grounded in the principles of service, humility, and ethical conduct, servant leadership can strengthen interpersonal dynamics and institutional effectiveness.

1. Transforming School Culture through Servant Leadership

Research indicates that servant leadership significantly shapes school culture, which in turn mediates overall school effectiveness. Alanoglu and Karabatak emphasize that servant leaders do not necessarily improve school performance directly; rather, they nurture a positive school climate that provides fertile conditions for growth and effectiveness.

Swart et al. further support this finding through their study of South African private schools, where servant-leadership practices were found to

[3] Eva et al., 2019; Suyatno et al., 2019.

improve organizational climate and thereby create an environment more conducive to student learning and teacher collaboration. [4]

2. Enhancing Teacher Well-Being and Commitment

Teachers' emotional well-being is a central element of a humanistic school. Servant leadership has been found to reduce emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, two major contributors to teacher burnout. By modeling care and practicing active listening, servant leaders provide the psychological safety teachers need to flourish.

In addition, servant leadership enhances teacher performance by fostering professional commitment and competence. These improvements are essential for sustaining high-quality teaching and cultivating a culture in which teachers feel valued and empowered. [5]

3. Building a Learning Organization

Schools led by servant leaders often develop into learning organizations in which continuous professional development and reflective practice are embedded in everyday routines. Tsarkos found that elements such as empowerment, emotional healing, and the creation of community value - all characteristic of servant leadership - are strongly associated with the development of schools as learning organizations. [6]

4. Alignment with Humanistic Educational Philosophy

At its core, servant leadership is closely aligned with the values of humanistic education. It promotes student-centered approaches, empathy, and ethical conduct. These orientations help cultivate classrooms in which students are respected, heard, and supported. Its emphasis on long-term development and moral integrity also equips schools to respond to contemporary educational challenges with resilience and purpose. [7]

5. Strategic Implementation and Capacity Building

Effective implementation requires deliberate strategies. Tsarkos argues that overcoming institutional resistance involves building a collaborative school culture and providing targeted leadership training. In addition, Dahiya highlights the value of psychoeducational programs that cultivate virtues such as forgiveness and benevolence, thereby reinforcing the humanistic foundations of schools. [8]

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs qualitative library research in the form of an integrative conceptual review. The unit of analysis is published scholarly and policy literature rather than schools, principals, teachers, or students.

[4] Alanoglu & Karabatak, 2025; Swart et al., 2021.

[5] Wu et al., 2024; Suyanto et al., 2024; Budiyanto et al., 2025.

[6] Tsarkos, 2023.

[7] Tsarkos, 2024; Mathew, 2023; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2025.

[8] Tsarkos, 2024; Dahiya, 2022.

Consequently, references in this article to the implementation or internalization of servant-leadership values refer to patterns reported in prior research and to conceptual implications derived from the reviewed literature; they are not presented as observations made directly by the present authors.

The source corpus was assembled purposively from foundational works on servant leadership, peer-reviewed studies on educational leadership, school climate, teacher well-being, inclusion, and humanistic values, together with literature that provides an Indonesian educational perspective. To strengthen contextual analysis, an official Indonesian curriculum-policy document was also included. Priority was given to sources that were academically credible, directly relevant to the study questions, and sufficiently detailed to support conceptual comparison. Literature unrelated to educational leadership or humanistic school culture was excluded.

Source identification combined keyword-based searching and backward/forward snowball reading. Search terms included 'servant leadership,' 'humanistic school culture,' 'inclusive school climate,' 'teacher well-being,' 'values internalization,' 'school leadership,' 'Merdeka Belajar,' and 'Indonesia.' This procedure was used to map conceptual relationships rather than to claim a systematic review in the PRISMA sense; therefore, the article does not report a statistical meta-analysis or an exhaustive count of all publications in the field.

The literature was analyzed through qualitative content analysis and thematic synthesis. First, relevant statements and findings were coded according to recurring leadership and school-culture dimensions. Second, codes were grouped into three principal themes: (1) egalitarian and empathetic interpersonal relationships, (2) inclusive and collaborative school climate, and (3) internalization of humanistic values in daily school life. Third, the authors compared evidence across national settings and conducted a contextual translation for Indonesia by examining points of convergence with the values and policy direction of Merdeka Belajar. No causal effect was inferred from this synthesis.

Analytical trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation across foundational theory, international empirical studies, Indonesian scholarship, and an official policy document; comparison of convergent and divergent findings; and transparent differentiation between evidence reported by prior studies and the authors' own conceptual interpretation. This design is appropriate for answering conceptual and contextual questions, but it cannot establish how servant leadership is actually enacted in a particular Indonesian school. Such questions require future field-based case-study or ethnographic research.

On this basis, the Results and Discussion section presents a thematic synthesis of the literature and then explicitly contextualizes the synthesis for Indonesian schools. The term 'results' therefore refers to patterns emerging from the reviewed sources, not to primary field data collected by the authors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Strengthening Egalitarian and Empathetic Interpersonal Relationships among Principals, Teachers, and Students

Egalitarian and empathetic interpersonal relationships in schools constitute an important foundation for creating an inclusive and humanistic learning climate. Qian and Walker show that paternalistic leadership and principals' empathetic communication can strengthen trust and emotional bonds with teachers. Teachers with strong empathetic capacities tend to establish positive interactions with students, strengthen social norms, and reinforce classroom cohesion.

Explicit equity-based interventions such as E-EMR have been shown to improve teacher-student relationships, particularly for students from minority groups. In addition, peer collaboration among teachers and the integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) strengthen inclusive practices and the emotional well-being of the school community.

Implementing these strategies requires school principals to act as cultural agents who lead with empathy, cultural responsiveness, and structural fairness. Through professional development that emphasizes empathy, equity, and collaboration, relationships among members of the school community can develop on the basis of trust and mutual understanding, which are prerequisites for twenty-first-century school transformation. [9]

2. Developing an Inclusive and Collaborative School Climate

An inclusive and collaborative school climate creates psychological, social, and physical conditions that support all members of the school community. Such an environment is characterized by mutually respectful relationships, a sense of safety, and values of equality and active participation. Collaboration among general-education teachers, special-education personnel, professionals, parents, and the broader school community plays an important role in supporting successful learning. Such a climate has been shown to enhance students' learning motivation and teachers' perceptions of efficacy in inclusive education.

Students' perceptions of inclusiveness and teacher support are also positively associated with emotional well-being and academic achievement.

[9] Qian & Walker, 2021; Mathew, 2023.

Developing such a climate requires strategies that include parental involvement, the use of instruments such as the Inclusive School Climate Scale, and the strengthening of two-way communication. Challenges nevertheless remain, including reactive perceptions among school management teams and regulatory pressures affecting parental participation. A systematic collaborative approach grounded in the values of inclusion is therefore crucial for creating schools that are welcoming, equitable, and participatory. [10]

3. Internalizing Humanistic Values in Daily School Activities

The internalization of humanistic values in daily school activities aims to develop students' character holistically across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions. Core values integrated into this process include empathy, honesty, justice, responsibility, personal freedom, and social concern. This approach supports the creation of a safe, inclusive, and caring learning environment.

The implementation of these values is particularly effective when embedded in active learning approaches such as "learning by doing," values education through the Education in Human Values approach, and the habituation of values through everyday interactions at school. The personal transformation of teachers into agents of values also plays an important role. [11]

However, major challenges in internalizing humanistic values include performative pressures such as academic targets and the limited availability of authentic instruments for assessing school culture. Comprehensive and collaborative strategies involving teachers, students, and parents are therefore necessary to make humanistic values an integral part of everyday school life. [12]

4. Contextual Relevance for Indonesian Schools and Merdeka Belajar

For Indonesia, the relevance of servant leadership becomes clearer when international findings are translated into the country's educational policy and cultural context rather than applied mechanically. Indonesia's national curriculum framework emphasizes learner independence, contextual adaptation, character formation, and the authority of educators and schools to organize learning responsively. These orientations intersect conceptually with servant-leadership principles such as empowerment, listening, stewardship, and community building. [13]

At the school level, this alignment can be expressed through several practical propositions. Listening and empathy can support student voice and

[10] Emam & Al-Mahdy, 2022; Alinsunurin, 2020; Hosford & O'Sullivan, 2016; Somerton et al., 2021.

[11] Darom, 2005; Wardhani et al., 2022; Packham et al., 2024; Farmer & Farmer, 2023.

[12] Frostenson & Englund, 2020; Lyon et al., 2017.

[13] Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia, 2024.

differentiated support; empowerment can strengthen teacher agency and professional learning communities; community building can be connected with gotong royong and partnerships with parents; and stewardship can encourage transparent, participatory decision-making through practices compatible with musyawarah. Indonesian research on values education through servant leadership also indicates that principals' exemplary conduct can serve as a bridge between leadership practice and character formation. [14]

This contextual translation is important because servant leadership is not culturally neutral. Findings from Chinese, South African, European, or North American schools provide comparative insights, but they should not be treated as templates for Indonesian institutions. Indonesian schools must negotiate hierarchical respect, collective values, religious and moral expectations, local community relationships, and formal accountability structures. The conceptual fit with Merdeka Belajar is therefore plausible, but the specific form, intensity, and effects of servant leadership will depend on local institutional conditions.

Accordingly, the contribution of this review is not evidence that servant leadership has already been successfully implemented across Indonesian schools. Its contribution is an integrative framework that connects the international servant-leadership literature with Indonesian educational priorities and generates empirically testable propositions. Future case studies and ethnographies can examine how principals translate service, empathy, empowerment, collaboration, and ethical stewardship into everyday routines, decision-making, teacher relations, and student experiences.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual review indicates that servant leadership can contribute to a humanistic school culture through three interrelated pathways: egalitarian and empathetic interpersonal relationships, an inclusive and collaborative school climate, and the internalization of humanistic values through role modelling, participation, and habituation. These conclusions synthesize patterns reported in the literature and should not be interpreted as findings from direct observation of a particular school.

In the Indonesian context, servant leadership is conceptually compatible with important orientations of Merdeka Belajar, especially learner-centered education, professional agency, contextual flexibility, collaboration, and character formation. Its relevance may be strengthened when service and empowerment are translated through culturally familiar practices such as gotong royong, musyawarah, exemplary conduct, and partnership with families and communities. This

[14] Suyatno et al., 2019.

contextualization helps prevent uncritical transfer of international leadership models.

The study's principal limitation follows directly from its methodology: library research cannot demonstrate how principals actually enact servant leadership in daily school life or establish its causal impact on school culture. Future research should therefore employ qualitative case studies, ethnography, or multi-site designs in Indonesian schools, supported by interviews, observation, document analysis, and triangulation. Such empirical work is needed to test, refine, or challenge the conceptual propositions developed in this review.

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