
Servant Leadership in Faith-Based Rural Schools: Principals' Responses to Contextual Challenges in South Africa

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Abstract. This study reports on a qualitative investigation into how faith-based school principals in South African rural contexts employ servant leadership to respond to contextual factors. While contemporary researchers debate the interconnection between leadership and context, our focus is on understanding how servant leadership in faith-based schools can address challenging contextual issues in these demanding settings. We argue that school principals in rural contexts navigate complex situations that sometimes challenge their leadership, management, and administrative abilities. Using a case study technique within an interpretative paradigm, we interviewed six faith-based school principals from three South African provinces, focusing on two schools each. The research revealed that these servant-leader principals influence their surroundings by building strong relationships with the community and staff, advocating a compassionate attitude to their teams, and increasing their employees' professional growth. They also emphasize collaborative leadership and initiatives to improve teamwork. Based on the data collected from principals of faith-based schools in rural areas, we recommend that future research investigate the relationship between servant leadership principles and academic outcomes in challenging contexts, investigate the effectiveness of servant leadership and community engagement in rural schools, and investigate the development and implementation of mentorship programs for teachers and principals in rural schools.

Keywords: Leadership, servant-leadership, faith-based schools, challenging context, collaborative efforts, cross-learning, positive relationships, community engagement

Introduction

Contemporary researchers agree that rural South African school principals encounter several contextual constraints. These challenges include inadequate infrastructure, poor parental participation, insufficient principal training, oversized classrooms, teacher shortages, poor quality education, and poverty (Bhengu & Myende, 2016; Myende & Phumlani, 2018; Myende & Selaelo, 2020). Despite these challenges, school leaders are expected to provide quality education and be proactive (Du Plessis, 2014; Van der Westhuizen, 2013). Furthermore, specialized training for principalship roles in South Africa is non-existent. However, it is understood that the demands school principals encounter in rural contexts often exceed their capacity to resolve. Rural context generally presents unique challenges in South Africa and beyond. Therefore, there is still a need to understand the kind of leadership needed to respond to these challenges.

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Heystek & Shula (2024) contend that although successful school leadership is considered paramount for ensuring school performance, the role of the principals remains complex due to challenging contexts such as limited community involvement, teacher absenteeism, and broader socio-economic difficulties. Consequently, Benghu and Myende (2016) as well as Chikoko et al. (2015) point out that the type of school leadership practiced in such challenging contexts is critical, particularly in dysfunctional South Africa schools.

Another intriguing factor is the increasing demand for school principals to be conscious of the type of leadership they exercise within their specific contexts (Hallinger, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2017). Furthermore, Welch (2015) points out that ever-changing contexts of a socio-economic nature further pose challenges for school leaders to look at their leadership roles from different perspectives.

The current study seeks to fill this gap by investigating how school principals of faith-based schools in South African rural settings use servant leadership to adapt to demanding contextual conditions. South African faith-based schools are not immune to the diverse contextual pressures that confront school leadership. Scholars such as Grace (2009) and Sullivan (2006:937) posited the fact that the category of faith-based schools has more complexity than those of public schools due to their “dual identity” and their “dual missions”

Therefore, this study sought to provide new insights into how leaders in faith-based school contexts practice servant leadership to navigate challenging circumstances. The leadership of this type of school is special because of the effect of their ethos and religious traditions (McLaughlin, 2015). Furthermore, these school leaders are required to blend their professional and spiritual lives in order to serve the school community (Edwards, 2014).

This indicates that they have to lead by example, create positive relationships within teams, inculcate collaborative effort, and serve others first. This observation underlines the unique nature of faith-based schools, as well as their leaders' focus on service. Consequently, we decided to focus on faith-based schools since there is very limited research on these schools from the South African context. Consequently, the main research question that guided our empirical investigation was formulated: *How do school principals of faith-based schools in South African rural schools' context practice servant leadership to respond to challenging contextual factors?*

While other types of leadership remain important in schools within challenging contexts, the decision is based on the view that “*servant leadership provides a conceptual structure for the new dynamics now required for leadership*” (van Dierendonck, 2011; Eva et al., 2019).

Firstly, this research was conducted in socioeconomic contexts that are similar to the quintile one of the South African public schools. Furthermore, this study places particular focus on faith-based schools because this category of schools has been put outside the margins of academic research in our country and beyond.

Cawood (2018) is of the view that from the South African vantage point, there is a paucity of empirically based qualitative studies focusing on practices of the principles of servant leadership by the principals of schools in faith-based challenging contexts.

However, there have been recent studies by Sherian (2018) that focused on servant leadership in public schools of KwaZulu Natal, and by Shula & Heystek (2024) that looked at the servant leadership practices and accountability of leaders of faith-based schools in South Africa. However, their studies did not consider the challenging contexts and the faith-based schools either which takes the central focus in this study. Van Dierendonck, Stam, Boersma, De Windt, and Alkema (2014) further suggest that servant leadership practices are needed in the South African context as the focus is on service, ethics, values, and religious belief, rather than self-enrichment.

This article was based on two rationales: firstly, with the experiences being principals in faith-based schools the researchers had the opportunity to connect with many principals whose

leadership approaches differed from servant-leadership. This, coupled with literature related to the subject under study, has prompted their interest in understanding how school principals of faith-based schools in rural areas practice servant leadership to respond to challenging contextual factors.

The second rationale for this study is motivated by the fact that the field of educational leadership research, particularly in the South African context, has not sufficiently included the leadership role of faith-based schools in rural contexts. We further agree with Grace's observation that various faith communities have not actively supported research on faith-based schools (Grace, 2009). Therefore, it is unsurprising that this lack of academic interest has resulted in a substantial gap in our understanding of faith-based schools and how leadership is perceived and implemented within these contexts. Thus, to enrich the scholarly literature in this area, we first formulated a conceptual framework centered on leadership in faith-based schools, followed by a theoretical framework focusing on servant leadership practices.

This manuscript's body is divided into seven sections: literature, theoretical framework, research design and methods, data analysis, presentation of findings, conclusion and recommendations.

Review of the literature

This section will discuss the literature pertinent to the topic of this article, including school leadership and context, as well as the context of faith-based schools.

School leadership and contexts

Researchers point out the importance of understanding the influence of school leadership in a particular context (Hallinger, 2018; Urick, 2016, Shula & Heystek, 2024).

Furthermore, Wasserman et al., (2010) posit that context shapes leadership. This happens for example when leaders try to respond to the challenges they encounter by adapting to their environment and also focusing on a particular style of leadership. Leaders, on the other hand, can influence the context in which they function by reimagining and creating suitable school conditions.

However, we share the common view that context shapes the type of leadership practiced by school leaders. Hallinger (2018) noted that the nature of leadership practices among leaders remains unclear. Consequently, our study addresses this gap by focusing on the servant leadership practices of faith-based schools in challenging contexts.

Researchers focusing on educational leadership confirm that leaders who are cognisant of their particular context achieve better outcomes (Brauckmann, Pashiardis, & Ärlestig, 2023). Furthermore, it is well-documented that context and academic improvement are interconnected. According to Gary (2006:386), context is defined as “situational opportunities and constraints that affect the leadership practices”. Brewer, Okilwa and Duarte (2020) define educational contexts as internal and external factors that affect and influence educational leadership practices. Brinia, Zimianti, and Panagiotopoulos (2014) note that school principals, by their position, are expected within and outside the school community to have the ability to influence educators and parents toward the achievement of the goal(s) of the school.

One such kind of leadership is servant-leadership, introduced by Greenleaf, whose focus is to serve others to develop themselves as leaders. The servant-leadership practice has a pivotal role in improving the current situation and improving the South African educational landscape in challenging contexts in South Africa. Consequently, the following sections will focus on the core element of this research which is servant leadership practices in relation to faith-based schools.

Context of faith-based school leadership

This study aims to explore how servant leadership is practiced in South African faith-based schools in the challenging contexts viewed from the principals' perspectives. Despite the interesting aspects of faith-based schools in our country, the field of educational research, especially educational leadership research, has generally overlooked this sector of schools (Grace, 2003, 2009). However, we contend that faith-based schools provide a rich and diverse environment for educational research. Furthermore, leadership in faith-based schools is unique due to the specific purposes, characteristics, and ethos of this category of schools, which shape their objectives and environments (Shula, Heystek, & Van Wyk, 2022). Furthermore, the leadership's objectives in these schools are shaped by the faith of each institution, its religious customs, and the procedures involved in admitting students and hiring staff.

The honesty and credibility of faith-based school leaders are of the utmost importance. Kouzes and Posner (2006:88) emphasize that "if followers do not have faith in their leader, they will not trust the leader's communication."

Theoretical framework

Servant leadership practices

This study is underpinned by the theory of servant leadership developed by Greenleaf (1970).

The phrase "servant-leadership" was initially coined by Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s. According to Greenleaf (1970:27), servant-leadership:

"Begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is a leader first. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served".

In his initial essay, *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf (1970) states that a leader's quest for a specific outcome is easy to identify but difficult to explain (Greenleaf, 1977). He further notes that effective leaders can point others toward the same goal. However, the one who identifies the goal must garner the followers' trust because the followers share the burden of risk.

The above reference indicates that the empowerment and well-being of others are crucial in servant-leadership practices, particularly in challenging contexts. Shula, Heystek & Van Wyk, (2023:12) note this as "a new leadership approach [that] attempts to enhance the personal growth of workers and improve the quality of the organization through a combination of teamwork, shared decision-making and caring behavior".

Spears (2019:7) summarised the works of Greenleaf and developed ten characteristics normally accepted among leadership researchers as characteristics that identify leaders as servant-leaders. These are "listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, growth, and community-building". These ten characteristics are generally acknowledged as the foundation of servant leadership. These characteristics give the essence or identity to a leader as a servant-leader. The focus of this article was to critically explore how school principals of faith-based schools in South African rural contexts practice servant leadership to respond to challenging contextual factors.

As explained, Greenleaf did not indicate the characteristics of servant-leadership since its beginning (Chang, Tsai, Zhang, & Chen, 2016). Realizing the antecedents and consequences of servant leadership, Laub (2010) developed a six-cluster servant-leadership characteristics measurement model in his organizational leadership assessment (OLA) model that highlights valuing people, developing people, building community, displaying authenticity, providing leadership, and sharing leadership, which set the benchmark for servant-leadership scientific

research thereafter (Van Dierendonck, 2013). Subsequently, several multi-dimensional measures emerged (Wolhuter, Van der Walt, & Steyn, 2016).

The first crucial aspect of servant-leadership practices is exhibited in the practical actions of the leader who leads and those who follow. Franco and Antunes (2020:351) emphasize that servant-leadership is based on the overarching action of caring for others while Eva et al. (2019:114) pointed out this dimension as an “other-oriented approach to leadership”.

Eva (2019) defines servant leadership as follows: (1) it is ‘others’ oriented, (2) the priority is about the needs and the interests of the followers, and (3) it develops others to be leaders themselves. Greenleaf (1977) points out that a leader is identified as a servant leader with a genuine concern about the hopes and needs of his followers and this paradigm makes servant leadership different from other leadership theories.

Kgatle (2018) understands the ideas of servant leadership as integrity, trustworthiness, and intelligent reasoning, while Black (2010) notes that the results of research conducted in other countries have indicated that the nature of servant leadership practiced can offer an acceptable parameter for educational environments. Furthermore, the study of Ling, Lin, and Wu (2016) confirms that servant-leadership can be effective at different organizational levels, including schools, and this leadership style enhances service-delivering behaviors in leaders.

In the academic research conducted on the principals’ servant-leadership in the contexts of disadvantaged public schools in Gauteng, educators indicated that their principals practiced servant-leadership characteristics such as stewardship, and a persuasive approach in their day-to-day practices (Swart et al.2022; Myende, & Maifala, 2020). These practices are believed to be partly responsible for the improvement of academic performance in those schools. However, our current study looked at how leaders of schools in challenging contexts practiced the principles of servant-leadership in faith-based schools and how its practices helped the followers grow and improved the quality of the service rendered to the school community through teamwork, shared decisions- and displaying caring behavior.

Research design

This study lent itself to the interpretive paradigm and employed a qualitative approach. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), the interpretive paradigm in research aims to understand the subjective experience of the participants. Furthermore, Creswell, Hanson, Clarke Plano and Morales (2007) posit that researchers who use an interpretivist or constructivist mode usually depend upon the perspective of the respondents in connection with the phenomenon under study. Consequently, to deepen our understanding of how principals of faith-based schools in South African rural contexts practice servant leadership to respond to challenging contextual factors, we had to interact with the participants and work with data located within the qualitative approach.

Scholars, such as Terre Blanche, Durkheim, and Painter (2006), are of the view that those who employ a qualitative design aim at making sense of the experiences, social events, or any phenomenon that occurs naturally. Hence it was our interest to learn from the principals’ experience of servant-leadership experiences geared towards responding to the contextual challenges.

In this study, the method we applied was a case study which helped us to do a deeper exploration of the present-day phenomenon within its natural setting, which is the servant-leadership practices of principals in a challenging context (Yin, 2018). Similarly, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) further affirm that this method aims to depict the image of what it is like to be in a specific life context. Rule and John (2011) further point out that a case study is a systematic and thorough investigation of a specific occurrence that is context-based to generate understanding.

Data Collection Tool

Employing a qualitative methodology enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study through verbal data. In this study, we used semi-structured interviews as our data collection tool. Data obtained from principals and deputy principals of faith-based schools in challenging South African contexts was used to understand the influence of servant leadership in these settings.

Sampling

As case studies are descriptive, it was necessary to identify “information-rich cases” (Patton, 2002:230). Consequently, we used purposeful sampling as the sampling strategy for this study. We decided to use this strategy, understanding that purposeful sampling could assist in the identification of significant understandings and practices of servant leadership and can enable a study to unearth significant similarities or differences between the varied contexts (Patton, 2002). We were of the view that the use of purposeful sampling would enable rich, descriptive cases to be developed by creating an in-depth personal level of understanding that aligns with the rationales of the interpretive perspective and case study design.

The three faith-based schools that were selected for the study comprised one Catholic, one Anglican, and one interdenominational school, operating in challenging rural contexts. Two key factors were considered when the researchers selected the particular schools. The primary factor was that the schools needed to represent the definition of the study which is faith-based school. Furthermore, the selected faith-based schools needed to have unique aims and surroundings that reflect the influence of the schools with a particular faith. Therefore, after the approval of the study by the ethics committee, the researchers contacted principals through personal email and phone calls to invite them formally to take part in the study.

The rationale for focusing the study on the principals was based on arguments that to develop a broader comprehension of educational leadership, the investigation needed to include a variety of school members’ perspectives and roles (Bottery, 2004; Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Leithwood, Sun, & Schumacker, 2017; Spillane, 2004). We selected the principals as the unit of analysis because they occupy a special place of formal authority and moral responsibility in schools; they set the direction, mould the culture, and directly influence the teaching and learning environment more than any other member of the school community. Unlike educators, parents, or students, whose roles are important but more localized, principals have the larger responsibility of finding a balance between faith-based values within these schools and contextual issues like socioeconomic constraints, and community expectations. They are therefore uniquely positioned to illustrate the application of servant leadership in such complex circumstances.

In this study, we employed semi-structured interviews, which gave us more flexibility. Furthermore, this helped us gain insight into how participants, in this case, principals of faith-based schools establish meanings out of their experience.

In this research study, we conducted six semi-structured interviews with six participants. Of the six interviewees, three were with principals and the other three individual interviews were with deputy principals. Each interview was audio-recorded. This process enabled us to focus on their deliberations during the interview process. Each interview lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. After the interviews were completed, we transcribed the recordings and shared the transcripts with the participants for verification. Maree (2016) points out that data in qualitative research is prepared, organized according to text, diagrams, or images, and then reduced into themes through coding and condensing the codes. In the end, data is presented as tables or discussions.

Data analysis

In academic research, data analysis involves interpreting the information gathered through texts, recordings, or images (Creswell, 2017). This process requires researchers to

deeply examine the data to extract meaning and address the studied phenomenon. In this study, data collected from faith-based school leaders in challenging contexts was transcribed and organized into themes. The analysis concentrated on the themes that emerged from the responses and our interpretation of these replies. We utilized deductive reasoning to conclude from the real-life evidence shared by these leaders (Maluleke, 2019). The transcription and data processing adhered to the phenomenological phases outlined by Maluleke (2019).

Data Presentation, Analysis, and Discussion

In this section, we present and discuss the data collected from six faith-based school leaders through semi-structured interviews, focusing on how school principals of faith-based schools in South African rural contexts practice servant leadership to respond to challenging contextual factors. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with three principals and three deputy principals from faith-based schools operating in the South African rural contexts.

The main research question that guided our study was: How do school principals of faith-based schools in the challenging context of South Africa practice servant leadership to respond to challenging contextual factors? To answer this, we posed three specific questions:

- (a) What is the principals' understanding of faith-based school leadership in their context?
- (b) What are the characteristics of servant leadership that positively influence challenging contexts?
- (c) How do they ensure the professional development of their teachers through servant leadership to navigate through challenging contexts?

Faith-based school leadership as a call to enhance positive relationships

The first question focused on understanding how school leaders of faith-based schools of challenging contexts understand their role of leadership in their context. We noted that school principals perceive their role as leaders in faith-based schools within challenging contexts as a call to enhance positive relationships with their staff and the entire school community. This perception is demonstrated by how the participants' communal beliefs are reflected in their leadership practices, fostering a resilient environment through relationship-building and collaboration with other school members to address contextual challenges and leadership responsibilities. These leaders further linked their leadership role in faith-based schools to the principles of ubuntu. The African humanist philosophy of ubuntu that emphasizes interdependence and the notion that one's humanity is determined by their interactions with other people (Tutu, 1999; Mbigi, 2005). Put in simple terms it places a strong emphasis on teamwork, shared accountability, and community service in leadership and education.

Principal A:

"My leadership role in a faith-based school is understood as a call to build relationships with others and lead as a team. This aligns with what my faith and the faith of the founding denomination of this school envisioned."

Principal B:

"For me, the leadership of a faith-based school is a call to work and lead together with others. I see myself as a leader among leaders and a servant among servants. Therefore, it is a call to be the keeper of my brothers and sister".

Principal C:

"For me and my staff, our leadership is a call to be a father-mother figure to our children. Most of our children in this area come from broken family backgrounds. I can count probably about 10 children in the entire school who live permanently

with both their parents. The majority live with their single mothers, and others with their grandparents. Some of these children have never seen their fathers. That is why I confidently say I am called to be the father-mother figure to these children in this faith-based school. This is how I also respond to the challenges brought by this context.

Principal D:

"Leadership of a faith-based school in this context motivates me to understand it as a call to serve, especially to serve the least in society. As you see, we operate under strenuous situations due to the challenges of poverty, unemployment, and fragmented parental involvement. Despite these challenges, I understand that I am here to serve and make a difference. Do you know why? Because I am convinced, I am called to serve. However, I must lead with others—my staff, stakeholders, and the community at large—in positive relationships. It is only by doing this that I can say we make a difference despite the contextual pressures we face."

Principal E:

"As you ask me about my leadership role at a faith-based school and how I navigate the contextual challenges, it reminds me of an African proverb I once heard: 'If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.' Indeed, the vision of our faith-based school is a vision formed by the community of faith. The community opted to go far together, not alone. In my day-to-day leadership at this school, this helps me to keep my head up. We walk together with our heads up to confront the challenges we face."

Principal F:

"Leadership of a faith-based school is a privilege to serve the community. Indeed, we are working under difficult circumstances, as you can see. As you were driving here, you might have noticed the conditions of the road, the infrastructure, and many other challenges. Despite these conditions, I know I am serving the community and the dreams of these children, so it is a vocation to serve. However, in my day-to-day leadership, teamwork is the best mechanism to navigate these challenges and improve the quality of our leadership together."

Promoting Compassionate Principles through Servant Leadership

This question focused on understanding how the principals' servant leadership creates a compassionate approach to responding to challenging contextual factors. Consequently, the second interview question focused on their understanding and practice of this ideal of leadership in their efforts to respond to contextual challenges.

Principal A:

"I'm here to serve. I think that is the foundation of the principles of servant leadership. I was privileged to have servant leadership as part of my training by the head of our school. Sometimes I get frustrated by the circumstances, yet I am firmly convinced that I am here to lead. However, in servant leadership, you care by listening first. It is only by listening that I can understand your situation, empathize with you, and show that I truly care. Otherwise, mmmm, I could run away from here, you know?"

Principal B shared:

"In my understanding, servant leadership entails being there for others, attending to their needs. I come from a strong Christian background where from childhood we were taught that God is there for us. There is a strong correlation between the principles of Christian faith and the characteristics of servant leadership: love, caring, listening, and healing are components of these. Therefore, even though the

situation here is very complex, as you see, what I believe in and the principles of this leadership guide me to navigate through this complexity by creating a compassionate environment."

Principal C shared:

"The servant leadership characteristic that identifies me as a servant leader in our context is empathy, which entails putting oneself in the shoes of others. As I shared earlier, most of our children come from broken family backgrounds. While I can be tough in demanding academic performance, I strive to empathize with their situations and provide assistance. I regularly engage in personal conversations with some children to know and understand them better, and I do the same with my staff. Although I do not accept mediocrity, I show compassion in their situations and assist where I can. This is how I respond to the contextual challenges that we face.

Principal D shared:

"We live in a broken society, with social, psychological, and financial challenges that require our attention. Serving as a leader in a faith-based school, I constantly ask myself what my role is. I believe I am called to heal and mend the wounds of my children, my staff, and the community around me where I can. I recognize this is difficult, as I also have my own wounds to mend. In our school, we strive to create a caring atmosphere where I listen to your story, empathize with your situation, and contribute towards our collective healing. This approach to servant leadership sets us apart and helps us create a positive environment despite the challenges we encounter regularly."

Principal E shared:

"We regularly hold staff meetings where we discuss school matters. However, at the beginning of every meeting, debriefing comes first. For me, the staff member as a person comes before the work they do. Caring for our caregivers is essential if we want to achieve quality work. I regularly open a forum where staff are free to express how they feel at work and what their needs are. I believe that through this process, we can navigate the challenges that surround us together and find solutions collaboratively. This, for me, is a fundamental aspect of servant leadership."

Principal F shared:

"For me, creating community relationships has been a source of strength in my servant leadership. The relationships we build help us to understand ourselves better and the surrounding context. I am fortunate to be part of this community and understand its circumstances. This understanding allows me to approach leadership with compassion, where I instill principles such as healing, empathy, understanding, and persuasion. I believe this approach is very helpful in succeeding in situations like ours."

Focusing on integral human development through Servant leadership

This question delved into understanding how the servant leadership practices of principals in their context enhance the integral development of learners and educators alike, helping them navigate contextual challenges.

Faith-based school principals reported that in their servant leadership practices, they create room for teachers to play a crucial role in the leadership of their schools. The principal of School B noted: "My leadership style is the one that nurtures, inspires and empowers others, encourages sharing and partnership for the good of our children".

Principal A noted:

"I shared earlier, that caring for my staff is essential for us to win the battle together. One of the mechanisms I employ for our development is cross-learning with and from nearby schools. We have regular meetings where we discuss aspects that will

help us develop and improve our leadership styles. This approach stems from a place of caring and, more specifically, from the principles of servant leadership."

Principal B:

"For the integral development of my learners, specifically those in high school, we have leadership training. In our faith-based school, the holistic development of the person is very important, as it is in servant leadership practices. Therefore, our leadership trainings for learners are geared towards developing them holistically—psychologically, physically, socially, intellectually, and spiritually. These trainings are integrated into our curriculum."

Principal C:

"In our school, we attempt to create an approach that fosters teamwork and shared leadership to help both educators and students succeed in their personal lives and academic roles. I know most educators wouldn't like to work under such conditions, but I want them to develop themselves in every aspect of life. Furthermore, I want my staff to be active participants in the leadership of the school to ensure leadership is distributed among the staff, not resting solely on one person. This will help them in the future when they take up principalship roles. Overall, their holistic development is essential for their success and the school's success too."

Principal D:

"As a Christian and leader in a faith-based school, I understand that I'm compelled to meet the holistic needs of the children and staff. I can only do this when I act as a servant and not as a boss. I think in servant-leadership there is a servant who becomes a leader to transform ... that is how I see servant-leadership."

Principal E:

"As you may know well, there are no trainings geared towards the development of school principals. After you complete your university degree whether you are based in rural or urban areas, you just take up your assigned role and keep the ball rolling. However, to navigate through today's contextual challenges, you need innovative skills. Consequently, my focus in this context is enhancing educators' professional development in the areas of conflict management, collaborative leadership, and leadership of both the heart and mind, as required. To be honest, we need to move with the signs of the times, and our skills and expertise should be aligned with this. Through the principles of servant leadership, this is how I deal with the integral development of my staff to face the current challenges."

Principal F shared:

"Through my empathy, listening, and persuasion, I have developed the idea of mentorship. I have realized that, in most cases, when we have new staff members, they need more care and companionship. Mentoring is essential. I sit with each staff member and ask how they are doing and where I can help them, be it in their personal life or academic pursuits. Therefore, the mentorship program uplifts the morale of the educators, particularly the new ones, to learn and develop their skills."

Discussion

In this section, we provide the key points that arose from the principals of faith-based schools on their experiences. This study reports on how school principals of faith-based schools in South African rural contexts practice servant leadership to respond to challenging contextual factors. The results revealed a strong connection between the theoretical concepts of servant leadership and their practical application in these schools.

Interactions with school leaders highlighted the importance of enhancing positive relationships with the community, creating a compassionate approach, and dedicating themselves to the integral human development of educators and learners as some of the ways servant leadership addresses contextual challenges.

The Principals noted that relying on faith in God, empowering others, and visionary leadership shaped their practices, positively affecting their challenging contexts. This aligns with Chang et al. (2016), who stated that servant leaders view their role as a call to serve humanity. Under the team of “enhancing positive relationships,” we also found that teamwork is a fundamental aspect of servant leadership that helps leaders address contextual challenges. Teamwork, closely tied to collaboration, has enabled school leaders to successfully lead their schools under challenging contexts. Our findings support Liden et al. (2008), who emphasized the importance of the exchange process between leaders and teams in servant leadership theory, particularly in challenging contexts. Effective principalship, therefore, relies heavily on genuine teamwork grounded in positive relationships.

Focus on the professional development of their staff is seen as an important aspect that helps leaders to navigate through the challenging context. This supports Kouzes and Posner's (2012) argument that school leaders must develop the competence of teachers and other stakeholders to help them work as a team and overcome challenging contexts. By empowering their followers, these leaders can indirectly influence their environment. This further aligns with the understanding that the primary goal of servant leadership is to achieve positive organizational outcomes by fostering staff development (Swart et al., 2022). This was evident in the experiences of faith-based school leaders in our study, who played a crucial role in promoting integral human development and enhancing the skills of their staff and students. Ultimately, this highlights the positive impact of servant leadership on team performance in challenging contexts.

Further analysis of the insights from this study indicated that although these principals' leadership is influenced by the context in which they practice servant leadership, their practice is further enhanced by the faith associated with their particular school. It was shown that biblical values also shape their practices. Empirical findings from this study indicate that school leaders can practice servant leadership to influence challenging contexts by understanding their role as a call to serve, fostering team spirit, enhancing collaborative efforts, building staff capacity, and promoting a positive school culture.

This study supports the idea that context shapes principals' leadership. As a result, faith-based school principals adapt to contextual challenges by developing their staff, fostering positive relationships, and enhancing teamwork.

Conclusion

Faith-based school leaders in challenging contexts discussed how they practice servant leadership principles to respond to difficult contextual factors from the rural schools' perspective. In their discussion, they highlighted the importance of creating positive relationships with the school community through teamwork and collaboration, fostering a compassionate approach through listening, attending, empathy, healing, and persuasion, and promoting effective integral human development through ongoing training, mentorship initiatives, and debriefing.

Although other leadership styles may incorporate relationships, compassionate approach, and integral human development, servant leadership prioritizes serving others above all. Furthermore, principals of faith-based schools succeed in South Africa's difficult environments by focusing on service, developing others into leaders, and promoting a collective vision to lead

as a team. Their Christian principles also make them mindful of integrity, humility, and credibility as essential values.

It is recommended that schools in challenging contexts need leaders who empower others, collaborate for the school's success, engage with the community by building positive relationships, and improve the leadership skills of their staff. The study suggests that additional academic research is needed to explore the qualitative analysis between servant leadership and quality education, especially in public schools, to improve academic outcomes. According to the research participants, the crucial elements of servant leadership that enable principals to navigate through challenging contexts are enhancing school-community relationships, compassionate approach, and inculcating integral human development of teachers focusing on their holistic development.

Based on the findings from the study we make the following recommendations for future research:

- Exploring the servant leadership principles and academic outcomes in a challenging context.
- The effectiveness of servant leadership and community engagement in the schools of rural contexts and
- Exploring the Development and Implementation of Mentorship Programs for teachers and principals in Rural Schools

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