



**SERVANT LEADERSHIP AS AN ISLAMIC ETHICAL PRACTICE:
EVIDENCE FROM PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS
IN KWARA STATE, NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out on servant leadership as an Islamic ethical practice: evidence from public secondary schools in Kwara state, Nigeria. The study was guided by two purposes with two research questions. The research design that was used for this study was descriptive survey of the correctional-type method. The population of the study consisted of 8,085 respondents from public senior secondary schools. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan, in which 278 was thereby chosen. Purposive and simple random sampling techniques were used to select the respondents in public senior secondary schools. A questionnaire was used by the researcher to elicit information from the concerned respondent, structured on a 4-point Likert rating scale. All the research questions were analysed using descriptive statistics of mean, standard deviation, frequency count and ranking order. The instrument was validated by my supervisor and two experts in the department of Education Management and Counselling at Al-Hikmah University. The reliability of the instrument was determined with Cronbach alpha at 0.71 and 0.80. The findings indicate that implementing servant leadership in schools aligns closely with Islamic ethical principles of responsibility, care, and service, demonstrating that these values can positively influence teachers' job performance. One of the recommendations of this study is that the school administrators should organize regular training programs for principals that focus on enhancing servant leadership skills.

Keyword: *Servant Leadership, Islamic Ethical, Secondary School, Kwara State.*



A. Introduction

The concept of servant leadership, characterized by a leader's commitment to serving the needs of their followers, holds profound implications for organizational dynamics and employee engagement within educational settings. In Islamic educational thought, leadership is understood not merely as an administrative function but as an ethical and spiritual responsibility rooted in trust (*amānah*), compassion (*rahmah*), and service (*khidmah*) to the school community.

Contemporary scholars emphasise that Islamic leadership is value-driven and morally accountable, requiring leaders to act with integrity, justice, and concern for the holistic development of others (Ezzani et al., 2023). This ethical foundation is reinforced by Qur'anic teachings that mandate the fulfilment of trust and fairness in leadership roles (Qur'an 4:58), as well as Prophetic traditions that define leadership as stewardship and responsibility. Recent studies have further shown that leadership practices grounded in Islamic ethical principles promote caring relationships, shared responsibility, and positive organisational outcomes in educational settings (Northouse, 2025). Setiawan, (2024) argue that Islamic educational leadership emphasises service to others and moral guidance, aligning closely with servant leadership values. Thus, leadership in Islamic education integrates ethical conduct, spiritual consciousness, and service as central principles guiding effective school management.

Servant leadership can lead to improvement of morale, commitment and finally effectiveness of the teachers within the classroom. Education is a means to attain national development in Nigeria. Wilson (2016) cited education as one of the essential tools used to develop the learners, through transfer of good attributes like skills, information and structured activities that could help advance the potential of the learners to the advantage of the society.

The National Policy on Education has set the educational objectives of the country in regard to their relation to the needs of both the individual and the society (FGN, 2013). In an effort to support the education development in the country, the National Policy on Education set some purposes and objectives. Schools should be in the position to be able to achieve institutional goals, which influence the achievement of national education goals, as they are formal educational institutions, which, however, remain fundamental students to find knowledge (Rukiyati, 2019).

Secondary schools play a significant role in achieving the educational strategy of the state across the entire world, including Nigeria. It is a formal organization that has a bureaucratic administrative framework with established rules and regulations that offer the necessary opportunities to learn and develop as well as to the staff in the school, which in most cases is led by the principal. One of the many parties that play a significant role in the success of a school in attaining its objectives is a principal. The reason is that the principal formulates the policies

and guidelines that are related to the development of the educational institutions (Oki et al., 2023).

The principal of a secondary school is the school's leader, and he or she is required to exercise a high level of responsibility in carrying out his or her duties. A school's principal serves as both the academic and administrative leader of the institution. As issues are handled and goals are met, his actions can have an impact on teachers, students, parents, and everyone else in the school organization. Teacher performance in schools can be a reflection of the principal's leadership style.

The declining academic achievement of secondary school students in external examinations, stakeholders in Kwara state's education system have serious worries about the job performance of teachers. The standard of instruction and learning that occurs in schools has drawn criticism from parents, students, the government, and even teachers themselves. The secondary school system has failed to produce individuals who can contribute to solving the educational problems of society, despite increased government investment in education and improved academic and professional qualifications of teachers.

The principles' servant leadership of secondary school may have an impact on the performance of their staff members. It entails a principal upholding the moral principles of integrity, humility, and servanthood and using these principles to support, encourage, and develop the teachers. In addition, the principal is a servant leader who sets a vision, assigns tasks and collaborates with teachers to achieve the goals. Ultimately, by modelling, team building, and collaborative decision-making with educators, servant leadership provides an example of achieving the vision, purpose, and goals that have been established.

Nigerian secondary schools are facing numerous challenges regarding academic performance of their students as a result of low teacher job performance, necessitating a concerted effort by the school administration to employ the best possible leadership practices in addressing challenges. Teachers' lack of dedication and poor job performance can be attributed to the school principal's leadership style.

The principal of a school holds an important position in the educational system. A principal's role may thus be divided into four categories: developing the educational program, choosing and improving people, dealing with the community, and administering the school. As the school's top executive and instructional leader of professional staff (teachers), he must supervise the interdependent actions of multiple individuals and groups working toward a shared goal. In reality, the principal's servant leadership behaviour is a significant influence in the school's success in meeting its goals.

Servant leadership has been highlighted in many circles as a beneficial developing leadership style that best soothes the emotional and psychological

aches of subordinates and meets their requirements. Many leadership authors have commended and stated that servant leadership produces healthy, dedicated followers who perform better at work. While transformational and transactional leadership styles have been widely studied, there is limited empirical research on servant leadership, a leadership approach grounded in ethical service to others within the context of Islamic ethical principles in Kwara schools. The integration of servant leadership as an Islamic ethical practice could potentially foster a culture of integrity, empathy, and accountability among school administrators and teachers. However, there is a lack of evidence on the extent to which servant leadership is practiced, its alignment with Islamic ethics, and its influence on school outcomes in public secondary schools. This gap necessitates a focused investigation to understand how servant leadership can enhance ethical practices and teachers' job performance.

The study aimed to examine the role of servant leadership as an Islamic ethical practice in enhancing teachers' job performance in public senior secondary schools in Kwara State by examining the level of servant leadership behaviour exhibited by principals, identifying the servant leadership behaviours most commonly prevalent among them. To guide the study, research questions were raised on the level of servant leadership behaviour demonstrated by principals in public senior secondary schools in Kwara State and the specific servant leadership behaviours that are most commonly exhibited.

B. Servant Leadership in Islamic Thought: *Ṭā'ah*, *Amanah*, and Moral Authority

Leadership is about putting the needs of others first, acting ethically, and caring for the well-being of the people you lead, rather than focusing on rank, titles, or personal power. This is a religious, moral, and spiritual based leadership model that is engrained within the Islamic thought process to determine how leaders should act. The key concepts in Islamic leadership theory are *ṭAAh* (obedience and moral discipline), *Amānah* (trust and responsibility), and moral authority that serves as a set of values, which one can easily convert into the ideas of servant leadership in modern management and education. Islamic thinking does not draw the distinction between leadership and ethics.

Leadership is viewed as a form of stewardship (*khilafah*) in which leaders are the custodians of the welfare of their community whereby the leaders are charged with the wellbeing of the people they serve. This concept is echoed in the Quranic injunction that says, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due and when you judge between people to judge just... (Qur'an 4: 58). Islamic scholars give this verse the meaning of broad ethical instructions not only in judicial or political leadership, but all types of responsibility that involve moral uprightness and justness (Al Naqbi, 2024).

The Amah which can be translated as trust or fiduciary duty serves as one of the pillars of servant leadership according to Islamic thinking. The leaders are regarded as trustees who are expected to be honest and reliable in carrying out their responsibilities.

The role of a leader is not the tool of power that a person is supposed to use to benefit himself but rather an obligation to serve the interests of others. According to Arar et al. (2023), stewardship (khilāfah) and amānah are two concepts that form an ethical contract between the leader and the community, and base the leadership activities on the obligations to God and humanity. Servant leadership in this perspective is not a strategic decision but rather an ethical requirement and it lays the groundwork in creating an ethical ground of leadership behaviour that puts a lot of focus on humility, service, and the overall welfare.

Obedience or taaqah, in the Islamic literature of leadership is the obedience to moral and spiritual values, as opposed to mindless obedience. It suggests order in behaviors and choices with ethical and religious standards. Obedience to the divine guidance by a leader promotes a leadership approach that upholds compassion, equity and restraint. Basri et al. (2022) suggests that leaders that practice ṭatah are morally disciplined, meaning they tame selfishness and enhance the well-being of the community, which is very similar to the concerns of servant leadership. In contrast to the secular servant leadership theory that focuses on serving the development and independence of followers (Greenleaf, 1979), the Islamic views inject a sense of obedience to moral dictates as a change agent in the leadership practice.

The Islamic thought of moral authority comes out of the character, ethical behaviour and service of other people by the leader. Moral authority, in contrast to the positional power, is acquired due to ethical behavior, quality, and evidence of concern towards other people. A study by Hassan et al., (2019) provides an insight into the ways in which moral authority leads to trust and cooperation in the organisational settings, which facilitates positive organisational performances.

The issue of moral authority is quite significant in the context of Islamic educational leadership since it affects the school culture and predetermines the teacher dedication and motivation. An example such as Setiawan (2024) discovered that educational leaders who practice moral values like justice, compassion and humility are the ones more likely to create an environment that promotes teacher performance and student engagement.

The correspondence of Islamic ethical leadership and servant leadership is also backed by the recent scholarship. Daldal and Uyanik (2021) opine that Islamic leadership models are similar to servant leadership in terms of the assumptions they make, such as focusing on the needs of followers, ethical self-discipline, community welfare, and acting as a role model. They believe that servant leadership qualities like empathy, stewardship, and ethical behaviour can be

sustained using the principles of justice (*adl*), mercy (*rahasmah*) and cooperative responsibility (*ta'aawun*) found in the Quran.

The ways in which these principles are applied in actual organisational setting has also been addressed through scholarly literatures on Islamic leadership. As an example, Al Shammari et al., (2022) investigated the leadership behaviours in the field of education and discovered that the leaders who subscribe to the values that were taught in the ethical teachings of Islam enhanced the job satisfaction and organisational climate among teachers. This confirms the thesis that Islamic forms of amana and moral authority do not just have theoretical meanings but also practical consequences of organisational performance and relationship.

Leadership in the Islamic mindset is not constrained to formal authority as well. It has a holistic moral perspective of leadership as an ethical profession that is based on responsibility, service, and spiritual accountability. This theoretical outlook is similar to the contemporary concept of servant leadership, which appreciates any leader who is a servant to others and can only earn his or her legitimacy through ethical behaviors and care of the wellbeing of the followers.

Incorporation of Islamic ethical principles like *tāa* and *amanah* and moral authority in the servant leadership theory has provided value based and rich perspective to improve our insights into leadership in learning and organisational context. It challenges leaders to go beyond transactional relations to relational leadership, service oriented leadership that builds trust, community and sustainable effectiveness. This integration is as philosophically rich and useful to those who want to balance ethical values and effective leadership practice as recent studies have revealed.

C. The level of servant leadership behaviour exhibited by their principals in public senior secondary schools in Kwara State.

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Remarks
1	Principal is always sincere with the teachers.	121	114	36	7	3.25	High
2	Principal always appears to learn from teachers also.	125	134	13	6	3.35	High
3	Principal is willing to make personnel sacrifices in serving the teachers.	66	175	37	0	3.10	High
4	Principal do not use manipulation or deception to achieve goals.	93	167	4	14	3.21	High

5	Principal believe that leadership is more of a responsibility than a position.	92	135	37	14	3.09	High
6	Principal genuinely cares for the welfare of the teachers working with him or her.	96	124	48	10	3.10	High
7	Principal consistently encourages teachers to take initiative and experiment with teaching.	107	112	29	20	3.13	High
8	Principal shows great satisfaction in bringing out the best in others.	80	112	57	19	2.94	High
9	Principal make himself or herself available to all his or her colleagues.	117	109	43	9	3.20	High
10	Principal is committed to developing potential leaders who will surpass him or her in the school.	97	156	13	12	3.21	High
11	Principal is based on a strong sense of mission.	72	137	59	10	2.97	High
12	Principal is very disciplined at work.	121	139	5	13	3.32	High
13	Principal usually comes up with solutions that are accepted by others as helpful and effective.	120	136	12	10	3.31	High
14	Principal is able to articulate a clear sense of purpose and direction for the school's future.	145	116	7	10	3.42	High
15	Principal set clear and realistic goals.	124	96	38	20	3.16	High
16	Principal leads by example.	132	174	59	13	3.16	High
17	Principal is willing to sacrifice personal benefits to promote group harmony and team success.	91	148	26	13	3.14	High

18	Principal is willing to have his or her ideas challenged.	144	100	21	13	3.34	High
19	Principal demonstrate to others how to make decisions and solve problems.	108	142	8	20	3.21	High
20	Principal value everyone on my team.	66	180	12	20	3.05	High
Overall Mean						3.18	High

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

Table 1 above shows the level of servant leadership behaviour exhibited by their principals in public senior secondary schools in Kwara State. Table 1 shows the mean scores of the individual items and the overall mean score of 3.18, it can be concluded that the principals in public senior secondary schools in Kwara State exhibit a high level of servant leadership behaviour. All evaluated items related to character orientation, people orientation, task orientation, and process orientation behaviours received mean scores above the midpoint of 2.5, indicating a high level of manifestation of these behaviours among the principals.

The finding revealed a high level of servant leadership behaviour among principals in secondary schools in Kwara State. This observation corroborates the findings of Ojulope (2017) and Alimi et al. (2012), which reported that principals in various regions of Nigeria, including Lagos State, frequently exhibit servant leadership traits. A widespread belief in the region is encapsulated by the principle of "treat others as you would like to be treated." Many individuals in the community adhere to the philosophy that one's actions, whether good or bad, eventually have repercussions.

The mean ranking of the principal's servant leadership behaviour in public senior secondary schools in Kwara State

S/N	Dimension	N	Mean	SD	Ranking
1.	Character Orientation Behaviour	278	3.22	0.36	2 nd
2.	People Orientation Behaviour	278	3.12	0.52	4 th
3.	Task Orientation Behaviour	278	3.24	0.53	1 st

4.	Process Orientation Behaviour	278	3.18	0.45	3 rd
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Source: Fieldwork, 2024

Table 2 above shows the mean ranking of the principal's servant leadership behaviour in public senior secondary schools in Kwara State?

The table shows that task orientation behaviour which has the mean value of 3.24 and standard deviation of 0.53 was ranked 1st, character orientation behaviour which has the mean value of 3.22 and standard deviation of 0.36 was ranked 2nd, process orientation behaviour which has the mean value of 3.18 and standard deviation of 0.45 was ranked 3rd, and People orientation behaviour which has the mean value of 3.12 and standard deviation of 0.52 was ranked 4th. The most prevalent servant leadership behaviours used among principals in Secondary Schools in Kwara State is task orientation behaviour since it has the highest mean value of 3.24 and standard deviation of 0.53. The finding indicated that "task orientation behaviour " is the most prevalent servant leadership behaviour among principals in Kwara State secondary schools.

This observation is crucial in understanding the leadership dynamics within these educational institutions. Task servant orientation, within the context of servant leadership, emphasizes a focus on organizational tasks and goals while concurrently prioritizing the welfare and development of the followers. The gap in literature on servant leadership that this study intends to fill is to establish the most prevalent servant leadership behaviour. Hence the researcher could not find any empirical studies on it as at the time of the study being conducted.

D. Conclusion

This study concludes teachers' job performance can be significantly enhanced when principals consciously adopt and demonstrate servant leadership behaviours grounded in ethical and spiritual principles, as emphasized in Islamic teachings. When principals act with humility, compassion (*rahmah*), integrity, and a sense of trust (*amānah*) toward teachers and colleagues, they create an environment where teachers feel valued, motivated, and inspired to give their best. Teachers are more likely to strive to meet the expectations of such principals because they respect and appreciate leadership that is selfless, caring, and supportive, even amidst economic and educational challenges.

This study confirms that alignment with Islamic values of service (*khidmah*) and moral responsibility encourages teachers to reciprocate through greater effort, commitment, and professionalism. Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that school administrators organize regular training programs to enhance principals' servant leadership skills through workshops and seminars focused on humility, empathy, integrity, and service to others. Administrators

should also provide training that helps principals balance task completion with care and support for their staff, fostering a holistic, people-centered approach to leadership. Furthermore, structured feedback systems should be implemented to allow students to share their perceptions of principals' leadership behaviours, using this input to guide improvements and cultivate a school environment that reflects ethical, Islamic leadership principles.

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