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An Evaluation of Teachers' Opinions about the Servant Leadership Behaviours of School Principals

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine the servant leadership behaviors that were displayed, or expected to be displayed, by principals towards the teaching staff at their schools, from the teachers' perspectives. The data was collected during focus group discussion with 12 teachers who were in service in primary and secondary schools. The teachers were chosen using the snowball sampling method. The data obtained from the participants was analyzed using content analysis. When the findings were evaluated, it was determined that the principals were not qualified enough to display servant leadership behaviors. Moreover, the teachers stated that principals should display servant leadership behaviors that are oriented towards community building, sharing, empathy, active listening, humility, and altruism. In this respect, it can be suggested that principals should receive servant leadership education through instructional programs that should be developed.

Keywords: servant leadership, school leadership, school management, principals.



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Introduction

With the coming of the Industrial Revolution, managers tended to regard workers as objects; merely the operating gears of a machine. However, about a century ago, a different mentality which focused on the individual, emotional, and social needs of the workers and regarded workers as notable members of the management structure, replaced the former mentality (Spears, 2002). The focus of the new approach was on the needs of workers and the required personal characteristics and behaviors of managers. In this context, the concept of leader was stressed as opposed to the concept of manager. The concept of leader focuses more on influence rather than on authority in the workplace. There are various conceptualizations of different styles of leadership and behaviors in the literature. In this respect, studies concerning leadership constitute one of the more dynamic subjects in the field of management.

Within this framework, many studies have focused on the concept of servant leadership (Buchen, 1998; Collins, 2001; Dennis & Winston, 2003; Van Dierendonck, Nuijten, & Heeren, 2009; Page & Wong, 2000; Patterson, 2003; Russell, 2001; Russell & Stone, 2002). Some of these studies developed conceptual and relational approaches. The other part of them was oriented towards servant leadership behaviors and to design devices to measure those behaviors.

The words leadership and service are generally regarded as opposing concepts according to the classical perspective. However, the co-occurrence of these two words that seems to suggest a paradox in fact offers a sensible and intuitional integrity (Spears, 2002). An area of interest of the servant leader is in his/her followers. The needs, interests, and expectations of the followers are important to the servant leader. In this respect, the relationship between the leader and his/her followers forms the focus of servant leadership.

Ciulla (1998) suggests that the leader should meticulously protect moral values. According to Ciulla, servant leadership is shaped under the influence of moral values. Other theories focus on key factors also associated with the principles of servant leadership. For example, Bennis (2001) emphasizes the concept of confidence and states that confidence forms the focus of servant leadership. On the other hand, Covey (2002) emphasizes the values of vision and compliance. Dennis and Bocarnea (2005) expressed the view that focusing on values and moral factors makes servant leadership much more comprehensible. It is not possible to mention servant leadership without speaking of honesty, confidence, humility, familiarity, and sincerity that are shaped by the leader among the followers.

Servant leadership, to some point, is intermixed with transformational and ethical leadership. Also, some scholars view servant leadership as 'an extension of transformational leadership' (Taylor, 2007). However, transformational leaders tend to focus more on organizational objectives, while servant leaders tend to focus more on people who are their followers (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). Transformational leaders build organizational objectives and then empower followers to accomplish those objectives (Kartal, 2016; Yukl, 1998). Conversely, servant leadership goes beyond transformational leadership by focusing on the needs of others as its highest priority (Bass, 2000).

Through the years of refinement, servant leadership has become much more people-oriented and ethical than originally envisioned (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2010). Even

though long-valued principles appear to be of little importance today, workers seek leaders they can trust, and they attach themselves with familiarity and sincerity to organizational environments (Van Dierendonck et al., 2009). In spite of the importance of the ethical dimension, servant leadership differs from the ethical leadership approach. For example, servant leadership is based upon moral authority (Sergiovanni, 2000). While ethical aspects comprise of one of the important elements of servant leadership (Page & Wong, 2000; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2010), servant leaders focus on serving others first. Ethical leadership focuses on what is right and what is wrong as a means of setting an example for followers and others about the rightness or wrongness of particular actions (Guy, 1990). Ethical leadership is defined by Brown, Trevino, and Harrison (2005, p.120) as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making’. In this definition we can also see that ethical leadership is more focused on modeling the ethical field than serving followers. While there are different dimensions of servant leadership that have been studied, the primary emphasis has been focused on social and emotional factors. According to Greenleaf (1977), since serving in the process of leadership is inherent to the situation, then it makes sense as a conscious behavior. Thus, an artificial service mentality is meaningless. Greenleaf stated that a servant leader gives a greater priority to the interests and needs of others, rather than to his/her own interests and needs. A servant leader focuses primarily on the needs of others. The endeavor of service, in turn, results in a leader earning the cordial reception and approval of his/her followers. In other words, managers who voluntarily and cheerfully support others are accepted as leaders because of the feelings they arouse in their followers. In this respect, servant leadership makes sense depending on a response which is completely based on the behaviors of the leader. A leader who primarily focuses on the needs and expectations of his followers behaves in accordance with belonging, teamwork, and cooperation through cordial reception and loyalty.

Dennis and Bocarnea (2005) investigated servant leadership in terms of commitment to the growth of people, demonstrating modest behaviors, showing confidence, loving and, trusting his/her followers and improving a common vision. Spears (1998) articulated ten components of servant leadership; active listening, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, transaction, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.

Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) developed a servant leadership scale that measured servant leadership behaviors in terms of level of self-sacrifice, willingness to do unrequited favors, persuasion, wisdom, and organizational management skills. Kiechel (1992), emphasizes five basic dimensions of servant leadership; listening, healing, remaining in the background, modesty, and organization. Buchen (1998), however, constructed his servant leadership concept based on four factors that he believed were most suited to organizations that are seen as part of the service sector, such as educational institutions and organizations. He emphasizes in his model that a servant leader should have a good personality, show reciprocal behaviors, be able to build relationships, and be concerned about and look toward to the future. Buchen (1998) determined that the follower should share the same understandings and behaviors as the leader, and that the leader should have the understandings and behaviors of the follower. Buchen regarded ‘reciprocity’ as the most

important concept in servant leadership. According to Buchen, reciprocity is the most important factor that supports cooperation and teamwork in this process. It will be possible to build healthy and strong relationships and communication in this manner.

In his research Ekinci (2015) determined the school principals' servant leadership behaviors were based on five dimensions such as, empathy, altruistic behaviors, humility, integrity and justice. When the related literature is investigated, it is seen that servant leadership is generally defined as focused on followers' relationships and followers' emotions. Based on this evaluation, servant leadership can be defined as a leadership approach that expresses school administrators' (e.g., principals, vice-principals) efforts to genuinely and sincerely assist in solving teachers' problems, being there for them during both their good times and bad times, supporting them, encouraging them, caring about them, showing empathy, treating them equally, trusting them, and treating them with modesty and self-devotion by striving to meet the highest priority needs of others.

Primary and secondary school principals in Turkey are appointed by school districts without any training and without regard about teachers' views. In Turkey, becoming a school principal in primary and secondary schools demands at least three years' experience as an assistant principal or eight years as a teacher in the same kind of school. The appointment of a school principal who has these requirements is based on the authority of the school district's decision (MEB [Ministry of National Education], 2014). In turn, principals believe they are responsible/accountable for their school districts only and not for their teachers. Such perceptions can affect principals' servant leadership behaviors. In this respect, teachers' perceptions about their principals' servant leadership behaviors are also important indicators about their principals' level of accountability.

With the above rationale in mind, the aim of this study was to determine the servant leadership behaviors that were displayed or expected to be displayed by principals towards the teaching staff at their schools from the teachers' perspectives. With this aim in mind, answers to the following research questions were sought:

- What are the perceptions of teachers towards the servant leadership behaviors displayed by their principals?
- What are the perceptions of teachers towards the servant leadership behavior that should be displayed by their principals?

Methodology

Data was collected in a focus group discussion. According to Bowling (2002), a focus group discussion is the use of the dynamism of the group for profound knowledge acquisition and the generation of ideas within an unstructured interview and discussion between a small group and a leader.

In this process, the knowledge of informed participants is essential for the study (Morgan, 1997). Focus group discussion has a significant function for data collection regarding capturing the reactions to manners, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and situations (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993). In the leadership literature, some studies are available to reveal dimensions of servant leadership and outline servant leadership behaviors (Spears, 1998; Laub, 1999; Russell & Stone, 2002; Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2010; Ekinci, 2015). However, it is thought that the study will reveal what kinds of behaviors

are displayed by school principals as servant leadership and what teachers' expectations are from school principals in terms of servant leadership within the school. In this regard, it is considered that the use of focus group discussion, as one of the quantitative methods, is a more appropriate approach in the determination of school leadership behavior that had not been agreed on theoretically in the literature. Additionally, it is considered that in a group discussion, teachers can put forward different views, give examples of events, and be more comfortable to express themselves while considering the opinions of their colleagues. This is seen especially in terms of giving the participants the opportunity to clarify the terms of debate and highlight different points of discussion. For this reason, focus groups are thought to be key in obtaining rich data.

In the literature, there are a number of studies detailing findings about the servant leadership behavior. However, it was thought that a new study was needed that could reveal the expectations of teachers from their school principals as they relate to servant leadership. Therefore, a qualitative study employing a focus group approach was deemed appropriate for leadership behaviors which are mostly not agreed upon in the literature. On the other hand, it was thought that teachers could compare ideas and maintain new opinions, thanks to the nature of the focus group. So, it was decided that the 'focus group discussion' method would be an appropriate method to collect data pertaining to servant leadership behaviors of principals according to the teachers' views. The social and emotional dimensions of servant leadership were especially dominant in the discussion. The obtained data on personal experience is also in confirmation of these views.

Teachers from 12 different schools participated in the focus group discussion. The reason that 12 teachers were selected to participate regards many scholars' suggestion that to 6 to 12 participants is an effective size for focus group discussions (Greenbaum, 1998; Yildirim & Simsek, 2006). In this regard, the upper limit was targeted by the researchers. Twelve teachers participated and they did so voluntarily. Thus, the working group of the study included 12 teachers (seven teachers from primary schools and five teachers from secondary schools) who were in service in schools in Turkey. The teachers had to be experienced in order to share informed opinions on the subject of the study, so at least four years' experience was required of the teachers. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 4 to 22 years, and the working group included eight males and four females.

The researchers determined two basic questions to collect the data. One of the questions was oriented to the current servant leadership behaviors of the principals and the other to the expected servant leadership behaviors from the principals. The two questions are:

- In what circumstances does your administrator perform the behavioral and emotional features of Servant Leadership? Please include, as much as you can, specific examples and stories of your principal's (or former principal's) behavior.
- What kind of behavioral and emotional approaches do you think school administrators can/should perform in the scope of Servant Leadership at their/your schools? Please list specific ways that Servant Leadership could support and benefit you as an educator.

A snowball sampling method was used to determine the participants. This method was used for the rich data that could be collected to identify participants who are concerned

about the issue because it is thought that it would be difficult to gather data about the servant leadership concept when many teachers had heard about it for the first time. Although it is important to provide informative text to give participants an idea, it is also considered important for participants to have experience and active involvement in order to provide responsive theoretical knowledge. For this reason, with the snowball sampling method it is possible to provide qualified participants more systematically and expediently from the first person who is reached.

With this aim, one teacher out of the population was contacted based on a local school district managers' suggestion. Then we acquired a list of schools located in Turkey. Next, we contacted the person who the local school district manager suggested and asked that teacher to recommend a teacher in Turkey who would be able to provide us with useful information about servant leadership. After this individual recommended a teacher, we made contact and followed the same process for the others until we had 12 teachers who were willing to share their opinions regarding servant leadership.

After receiving this information, the researchers contacted each participant. Each of the 12 participants was from a different school. Each of these teachers was clearly informed about the subject and aim of the study. Then, he/she was asked to voluntarily participate in the focus group session. This process was then applied to each new participant until the 12 participants were determined (Yazicioglu & Erdogan, 2004; Yildirim & Simsek, 2006).

After determining the participatory group, an informative text on servant leadership was prepared. Then, a copy of the text was distributed to each of the participants to read before the discussion. The discussions were conducted during a two-hour session. The researchers asked the participants to make a choice between a voice recording and notes being taken of their opinions. The participants preferred the note taking. Then, two people were asked to write up the opinions of the participants.

The content analysis method was used to analyze the data. Content analysis is now considered as an umbrella term referring to a significant number of diverse research strategies, approaches and techniques. Broadly, content analysis refers to a set of methods for studying or retrieving meaningful information from documents. More specifically, content analysis can define a family of techniques for studying the unspoken information or evidence of texts and artifacts (Hodder, 1994). The main aim of content analysis is to obtain the concepts and relations that can explain and give meaning to the collected data (Yildirim & Simsek, 2006).

The most used five types of texts used in content analysis are written text, such as books and papers, oral text, such as speech and theatrical performance, iconic text, such as drawings, paintings, and icons, audio-visual text, such as TV programs, movies, and videos, and hypertexts, which are texts to be found on the Internet. The main data source in this study was oral text. The expressions of teachers were recorded and analyzed in terms of their content.

The main aim of this research was to determine the teachers' views about the two research questions; therefore content analysis was practical for this process. Before analyzing the data, both records of the discussion were investigated. It was concluded that these discussions were consistent with each other and similar notes were taken. The opinions that were included in both of the records were subjected to content analysis. The

opinions were presented as sentences and conceptual statements in terms of the analysis unit. In addition, the opinions of the participants were directly presented and discussed when required.

Findings

The opinions of the teachers regarding servant leadership behaviors of the principals are shown below. First, the opinions of the teachers about the servant leadership behaviors of the head teachers towards the teachers were analyzed and presented in Table 1. Then, the opinions of the teachers about their expectations of servant leadership behaviors from the principals were analyzed and presented in Table 2. In both cases, the opinions of the teachers were analyzed via content analysis. The opinions were presented together with related sentences, and these sentences were matched with the related concepts.

Table 1. Subject which principals display servant leadership behavior according teachers' opinion

No	Opinions	Related concepts
1	He/She displays a friendly approach.	Familiarity, kindness
2	He/She does not leave me alone on my special days.	To value and support
3	He/She cares about objectivity and fairness.	Justice
4	He/She is supportive in problem-solving. He/She responds to the demands on the school and management. He/She supports the teacher on bad days. He/She tries to provide the required materials.	To support and empower
5	He/She consults me on subjects that concern me.	Caring, taking decisions according to the team, sharing responsibility
6	He/She draws attention to ethical principles.	Ethical conduct
7	He/She behaves modestly in his/her relationships.	Modesty
8	He/She encourages cooperation.	Building the community, making a team, sharing the responsibility

Table 2. Servant Leadership Behaviors That Principals Should Display According to Teachers

No	Opinions	Related Concepts
1	He/She should arrange social activities in which teachers can come together.	Building community, sharing, organization
2	He/She should develop good relationships. He/She should develop a friendly and familiar relationship style. He/She should have empathic relationship skills. He/She should make his follower feel that he cares about them, through being a listener.	Developing relationships, empathy, listening, caring
3	He/She should be modest. He/She should be familiar and sincere and make this felt. He/She should be thoughtful towards the teachers. He/She should respect and value the teachers. He/She should treat the teachers with love and sincerity.	Modesty, familiarity, sincerity, love, a sensibility of respect, an ability to value
4	He/She should support and empower the teachers. He/She should be beside the workers on bad days. He/She should defend and embrace the teachers. He/She should motivate and encourage the workers in terms of the profession. He/She should hand over initiative to the workers.	To support, develop, be helpful, an ability to embrace, hand over initiatives, encourage
5	He/She should share the responsibilities and workload at the school. He/She should do his best for the arrangement and preparation of the educational environment. His/her relationships should be strong outside of the school. He/She should be visible in the school environment.	Responsibility and sharing the leadership service and doing favors willingly, be pioneering
6	He/She should stand alongside the teachers, especially on special days such as deaths, births and weddings.	Service, supporting, team mentality
8	He/She should be determined in problem solving.	Determination, problem-solving
9	He/She should be patient and stoical.	Patience
10	He/She should deliver positive messages on the achievement and self-sacrifice of the teachers. He/She should operate an appreciation and reward system. He/She should reward and appreciate achievement in moderation.	Rewarding, caring, appreciation
11	He/She should trust in the teachers. He/She should keep confidences.	Keep confidences
12	He/She should include the teachers in decision making and focus on works based on voluntariness. He/she shouldn't expect things in return in his/her social relationships.	Participation-based decision making, being of service and doing favors willingly
13	He/She should adopt a fair manner and approach.	Justice

When the opinions of the teachers about their expectations of servant leadership behaviors from the principals on Table 2 are analyzed, it is seen that teachers identified behaviors that are similar with what was identified in the literature as servant leadership dimensions. According to the teachers, expectations of their principals, in terms of servant leadership behavior dimensions, are widely focused in communication (developing relationships, listening, sincerity, building community etc.) and social and emotional support (service and favors, caring, supporting etc.). These findings reveal that it is important for school principals to have a good relationship with teachers, build school community, listen to teachers, have empathy and to support them, serve them, defend and protect them. For schools, the servant leadership approach has the function of being aware about teacher's needs and also focusing on these needs and developing a behavioral approach for them. In this regard, the school principal's sensibility will play an important role according to teachers' expectations for their acceptance of servant leadership.

The school is an organization where human affairs and feelings are intense, in addition to its being a bureaucratic organization. Therefore, the role of principals in conducting their administrative duties efficiently and building productive organizational climates cannot be denied. Servant leadership behaviors have important functions in generating a healthy organizational climate where sincerity and emotional commitment exist. For instance, participant A had the following opinion:

There is a certain distance between the principal and the teachers in our school. Teachers complain that the principal deals with the paperwork, the compulsory bureaucracy, more than he takes an interest in the teachers and education. The principal talks about the obligations; but such obligations cannot always be met. He is stuck in the theory. In addition, I think the main concern that causes a distance between the teachers and principals is, first of all, the principal does not come out of his room. He cannot build intense personal relationships with the teachers due to his personality. This miscommunication due to the personality of the principal causes the teachers to keep themselves apart. The humanistic connection between the principal and the teachers has been broken recently. The principal distributed invitation cards to all of the teachers for the wedding ceremony of his son. However, only two teachers attended the ceremony out of the 45-50 invitees. I concluded from their manners at school, that that the principal was offended by the teachers. Minimal relationships have taken the place of the poor relationships between the principal and the teachers.

In this study, when the opinions of teachers were analyzed, it was evident that the expected servant leadership behaviors of principals consisted not only of positive behaviors, but also on management strategy. Furthermore, these behaviors (carrying out activities oriented to social sharing, supporting the workers, being an effective listener, handing initiative to the workers, etc.) are only gained through servant leadership education. For example, participant F emphasized the developing role of the relationships that principals should build in the following statement:

First of all, teachers should organize special days in which the principals and the teachers can come together and socialize within the servant leadership. He should also build sincere relationships with teachers both in and outside of the school. He should be modest in his behaviors toward the teachers. He should not make the teachers feel a status gap. He should develop friendly relationships with teachers.

Conclusion and Discussion

The data was collected in focus group discussions that were held with the teachers and centered on their opinions of their principals' servant leadership behaviors. The teachers were asked to express their opinions when considering their own principals. Three of the participants stated that their principals did not display any servant leadership behaviors. When the opinions of the participant teachers were evaluated, it was concluded that the servant leadership behaviors of the principals were limited. As is noted in the findings, it is possible to say that the behaviors which are evaluated within the servant leadership paradigm are generally restricted to the personality (goodwill, ethics, modesty, cooperation-based approach, human affairs, etc.). Personality is a critically important factor in the servant leadership approach (Greenleaf, 1977; Laub, 1999; Spears, 2002). For example, Spears (2002) regards the personality as one of the most important resources of servant leadership. Modest, compatible individuals who try to solve the problems of others create an impact on and generate an acceptance in their staff. These feelings arise depending on these characteristics of the individual, and this impact and acceptance is an important resource of servant leadership. However, regarding the behaviors which are accepted within servant leadership as only a reflection of the personality restricts the idea of servant leadership. In this concept, personality is an important dimension of servant leadership. Intentional behaviors toward followers also plays an important role (Daft, 2001). However, it was concluded from the findings that the servant leadership behaviors displayed by the principals were not sufficient in terms of quality and quantity. Thus, principals should develop conscious behavioral approaches toward the teachers in addition to displaying goodwill and personality-based servant leadership behaviors (Patterson, 2003).

Teachers in the current study identified their opinions about their school principals' behaviors in terms of servant leadership as having relations that are friendly and kind, showing respect and value, treating with justice, supporting and encouraging them, caring for them and sharing responsibility, having ethical and modest behaviors and building community in school. When these findings are evaluated, it can be concluded that school principals show their servant leadership behaviors based on relationships in a narrower frame. For instance, in the literature, although servant leadership behaviors are still not agreed upon, many studies have determined and widely accepted dimensions such as an empathetic relationship, stewardship, integrity, listening, encouraging, sincerity, vision, humility, healing, and justice (Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Laub, 1999; Patterson, 2003; Spears, 1998). For this reason, when findings in this study are compared with the literature, it can be interpreted that school principals do not have sufficient servant leadership behaviors and need to develop these behaviors.

In this study, this situation reveals that the above principal is a bureaucratic manager rather than a leader. This teacher indicates that the teachers and principal have nothing in common except the compulsory assignments and relationships and refuse to accept any invitations from the principal. It is seen that the humanistic relationships between the teachers and the principal can disappear. Servant leadership behaviors contribute to the cooperation and teamwork within or outside of the organization in terms of a sense of 'belonging' and other sharing (except from work) that are created within the context of reciprocity. In this context, the principals should primarily be sensitive to the needs and

expectations of the teachers. The principals should offer opportunities for space and time sharing in and outside of the school.

The second stage of the study is based on the servant leadership behaviors that principals could display or are expected to display towards the teachers. When the findings were investigated, teachers offered a wide range of opinions on the behaviors that principals could display in and outside of the school. The most emphasized behaviors involve developing communication skills, offering opportunity for common space and time sharing, sincerity, goodwill, tolerance, respect, empathy, sensitivity to the problems of the workers, and supportive approaches. The data collected clearly coincides with the dimensions of servant leadership as determined by a number of key researchers in the field (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Buchen, 1998; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Dennis & Winston, 2003; Joseph & Winston, 2005; Kiechel, 1992; Walker, 1997).

Data revealed that teacher perceptions included ideas about positive behaviors of principals as well as effective management strategies. Taylor (2002) stated that effective servant leadership was primarily dependent on a leader who is an effective listener and signals to his real followers that he understands and cares for them. Taylor (2002) also stressed the importance of communication skills in this statement. DeGraaf, Tilley, and Neal (2001) stated that nearly 45% of the energy was consumed through misunderstandings or a lack of understanding and communication problems in the social dimension of an organization. Most of the expectations of the participants, explained as servant leadership behaviors, focus on communication skills. The behaviors that principals should display in this context play an important role.

In this study, some participants stated that their principal as a servant leader was not sufficient, especially in social relationships, communication, empathy, and modesty. However, much research has suggested that servant leadership could be built on modesty, sincerity, altruism, cooperation and reciprocity rather than on a hierarchical model (Daft, 2001; Laub, 1999; Page & Wong, 2000; Patterson, 2003; Spears, 2002). These researchers have also stated that the above-mentioned factors are prerequisites for achieving organizational goals. Organizational structures such as schools are especially shaped by and depend on social relationships and interaction, and leaders who display the required servant leadership behaviors are much needed in those organizations.

When the data were evaluated, the behaviors of the principals within the servant leadership context were found to be less than desirable. A list of suggested servant leadership behaviors covering the dimensions of the subject appeared when the opinions of the teachers were investigated. In this context, the primary suggestion is that principals should receive servant leadership education via instructional programs that could be developed based on the present findings.

Notes

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