Servant Leadership and Compassionate School Cultures in South African Catholic Schools

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Abstract

This study explored how servant leadership can foster compassionate school cultures in Catholic education, aiming to support the holistic development of learners, as viewed through the eyes of South African school principals. The research was driven by a desire to understand how ethical, relational, and faith-based leadership practices influence students' emotional, social, moral, and academic wellbeing, especially in Catholic schools that weave spiritual and moral guidance into their educational framework. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to gather insights from the principals' lived experiences, employing semi-structured interviews and document analysis as the main methods for data collection. Twelve principals, purposively selected to represent urban, peri-urban, and rural Catholic schools, took part in the study. The data were analysed thematically to uncover patterns and insights related to servant leadership practices, the challenges faced, and their effects on school culture.

The study identified four main themes: the essential role of empathetic presence in fostering compassion, the importance of relational care through meaningful interactions with both staff and students, the integration of faith-based moral and spiritual development in line with Catholic Social Teaching, and the challenges to maintaining compassionate practices, such as limited resources and teacher burnout. Principals noted that servant leadership creates inclusive and supportive school environments, which in turn promotes the overall development of learners by addressing their emotional, social, and ethical needs alongside their academic progress. The research concludes that when servant leadership is implemented through empathy, relational care, and faith-based principles, it can significantly transform Catholic education. It highlights the need for intentional leadership, systemic support, and the incorporation of culturally and spiritually relevant frameworks, like Ubuntu and Catholic Social Teaching, to nurture compassionate school cultures. These findings have important implications for developing leadership, shaping policies, and advancing holistic, learner-centred education in faith-based school contexts.

Keywords: servant leadership; compassionate school culture; Catholic education; Ubuntu; Holistic learner development

Introduction

Leadership in education is vital for fostering environments that not only support academic achievement but also contribute to the overall growth of students, including their wellbeing, moral values, and emotional development (Bush, 2020; Fullan, 2014). More and more, researchers are promoting leadership styles that focus on ethical relationships, care, and service instead of authority and control (Begley & Stefkovich, 2007). One effective model is servant leadership, which emphasizes the importance of serving others, building trust, and improving community wellbeing (Eva et al., 2019; Greenleaf, 1977). This approach aligns well with the principles of holistic education, which acknowledge that emotional, social, ethical, and spiritual aspects are crucial for delivering quality education (Noddings, 2013; Miller, 2007).

In Catholic education, the goal of nurturing compassionate and morally grounded individuals is at the heart of the mission (Grace, 2016). Catholic schools are built on principles that emphasise dignity, moral development, and community care, aligning with the teachings of Catholic Social Teaching that highlight human growth and relational responsibility (O'Keefe & Kopko, 2022). The leadership in these schools is expected to embody not just organizational skills but also a moral purpose, creating environments that promote students' emotional and relational wellbeing alongside their academic success (Ohiwerei & Efosa, 2023). Servant leadership, which emphasises empathy, stewardship, and prioritising the needs of others, aligns well with the educational and spiritual missions of Catholic schools. Developing the whole learner means encouraging emotional resilience, moral agency, social connections, and a positive sense of identity, all of which are deeply influenced by the relational and cultural dynamics within school settings (Sergiovanni, 1992). Studies indicate that schools with a compassionate climate—where care, empathy, and ethical relationships are integral—greatly improve students' social-emotional wellbeing and their sense of belonging (Ware et al., 2022). These elements are associated with lower anxiety levels, increased engagement, and better overall developmental outcomes, highlighting the crucial role of compassionate leadership in modern education.

Servant leadership focuses on building relationships, listening actively, behaving ethically, and fostering the development of others. This approach is especially effective in environments that prioritise holistic development (Joseph & Winston, 2005). Leaders who practice servant leadership often cultivate trust, create psychologically safe spaces, and demonstrate compassion in their interactions, all of which can significantly shape the culture of a school (Liden et al., 2020). In Catholic schools, where spiritual and moral values are integral to the educational experience, servant leadership provides a relevant and coherent framework for leadership.

In South Africa, schools face significant socio-economic challenges, emotional trauma among students, and increasing demands on teachers that affect the overall

school climate and student wellbeing (Hoadley & Christie, 2022). In these circumstances, leadership that emphasises compassion, care, and respect for human dignity is crucial for alleviating stress and fostering emotional resilience. The South African educational landscape is influenced by unique cultural and historical elements, including Ubuntu—a philosophy that highlights community harmony, respect, and interconnectedness—which enhances the importance of service-oriented leadership styles (Mbigi, 2007; Nussbaum, 2003). Ubuntu's emphasis on shared humanity and collective wellbeing resonates with the core principles of servant leadership, particularly its focus on relational care and service. Research into servant leadership within South African public schools has started to gain traction (Maphumulo & Bloch, 2024), yet there is still a significant gap when it comes to Catholic schools. This category of schools uniquely blend faith-based values with educational practices, and we know surprisingly little about how Catholic school principals understand and implement servant leadership to foster compassionate environments that support students' social, emotional, and moral growth (Shula, 2025). This understanding is crucial because holistic education—especially the wellbeing and character development of learners—relies not just on what is taught in the curriculum but also on the relationships and cultural dynamics present in school communities.

International studies indicate that servant leadership can have a positive impact on the wellbeing culture in schools. For instance, research conducted in Irish Catholic schools shows that behaviours associated with servant leadership, like empathetic listening and community care, have significantly enhanced staff wellbeing and student engagement (O'Leary & Byrne, 2023). Likewise, findings from Australian secondary schools suggest that servant leadership practices are linked to increased teacher support and a stronger sense of belonging among students (King & Baxter, 2022). While these studies underscore the potential benefits of servant leadership, the variations in cultural, socio-economic, and religious contexts mean that their findings cannot be directly applied to South African Catholic schools, highlighting the need for research tailored to this specific context.

This study aims to explore the views of South African Catholic school principals on how servant leadership fosters compassionate school cultures that support the holistic development of learners. Drawing on the lived experiences of these principals, as well as the researcher's experience as a former Catholic school principal, the study seeks to enhance understanding of how servant leadership operates within faith-based environments. In doing so, it explores how such leadership influences school cultures that promote emotional well-being, moral development, and social growth. By highlighting the insights of principals, this study will add to leadership theory and provide practical recommendations for leadership training and practices in Catholic and other compassion-focused educational settings.

Problem Statement

Despite the widespread acknowledgment of the need for holistic learner development, many schools still focus primarily on academic performance, often neglecting the emotional and social wellbeing of learners (McGrath & Noble, 2022). In South Africa, the lingering effects of inequality and socio-economic challenges add extra strain on the mental health of young people, with many schools lacking the leadership practices necessary to nurture emotional resilience and compassionate care (Chikoko & Tikly, 2023). Although Catholic schools aim for a holistic educational approach, there is a lack of empirical evidence on how leadership practices can effectively support these goals. This gap is concerning, as leadership plays a crucial role in shaping school culture, influencing teacher behaviour, and enhancing student experiences, especially regarding emotional wellbeing and moral development.

The South African education system is characterised by high levels of student stress, violence, and trauma, largely due to community conditions, chronic poverty, and social disintegration (Jones et al., 2024). These realities call for leadership that prioritises the emotional and relational aspects of education, rather than just focusing on organizational compliance. Traditional leadership models, which emphasise hierarchical authority and performance metrics, often overlook the emotional climate and social support systems within schools (Naidoo & Beswick, 2023). As a result, learners may find themselves in academically rigorous environments that lack emotional support, hindering their overall development. Holistic learner wellbeing includes aspects like psychological safety, positive relationships among peers, the formation of moral identity, and skills for emotional regulation. These areas are greatly influenced by leadership behaviours and the culture within schools (Cipriano & Brackett, 2021). When leadership emphasises empathy, ethical care, and community building, it can affect how teachers connect with students, how conflicts are managed, and how emotional needs are addressed. However, there is a lack of research exploring how these leadership dynamics function in South African Catholic schools and how effectively they promote compassionate cultures that support wellbeing.

Additionally, while servant leadership has gained interest in organizational studies and research on spirituality in leadership, there is limited context-specific understanding of how school principals implement servant leadership in educational environments that prioritize holistic development. Most existing literature on servant leadership in education tends to focus on teachers' perceptions or organizational performance, often overlooking the relational and emotional impacts on students (Joseph & Winston, 2020). In Catholic schools, where the educational mission explicitly aims to nurture compassionate citizens, this gap is particularly concerning, as leaders' interpretations of servant leadership can significantly influence the school ethos and the social-emotional experiences of learners.

In South Africa, educational research has highlighted a significant philosophical connection between servant leadership and Ubuntu, a cultural ethic that emphasises interconnectedness and human dignity (Tihanyi et al., 2023). Ubuntu posits that individuals are shaped by their relationships and responsibilities to others, promoting care, empathy, and collective wellbeing as key educational goals. However, there has been little effort to merge the concepts of servant leadership and Ubuntu within the context of Catholic educational leadership studies, creating a gap in both theory and practice regarding how leadership philosophies rooted in relational care can impact school cultures and student wellbeing. Moreover, Catholic school principals often struggle to balance their managerial duties with the moral and pastoral expectations set by their communities and church authorities (Grace, 2020). While mission statements highlight the importance of holistic development, principals may not have the necessary frameworks or professional development opportunities to implement leadership that consistently incorporates compassion into their daily practices. Without solid evidence of effective leadership strategies that promote compassionate school cultures, leadership programs may continue to prioritize administrative efficiency over relational skills, unintentionally overlooking student wellbeing.

The scarcity of research on servant leadership in South African Catholic schools also hampers policymakers' efforts to create targeted support for leadership development that aligns with holistic educational goals. Education departments and the umbrella bodies of such schools need evidence-based strategies to enhance principals' abilities to cultivate environments where learners feel supported, valued, and emotionally secure. This researcher contends that research that delves into principals' viewpoints is crucial for uncovering the subtle ways in which leadership influences compassionate cultures and for identifying the barriers and facilitators of servant leadership practices in Catholic schools' context. This researcher further believes it is essential to explore how servant leadership practices can foster compassionate school cultures that support the overall development of learners in Catholic schools. Without this understanding, leadership training, policies, and practices may neglect the relational and emotional dimensions of education that are vital for students' wellbeing and moral development. This issue highlights the need for thorough, context-specific research that explores principals' real-life experiences and interpretations of servant leadership in practice. Addressing this gap will not only enhance educational leadership theory but also offer valuable insights for creating emotionally supportive and ethically sound school environments that genuinely promote holistic learner development in South African Catholic schools.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on a comprehensive leadership framework that combines Servant Leadership Theory, Ubuntu philosophy, and Holistic Wellbeing Theory. These theories

work together to offer a well-rounded perspective on how leadership practices can foster compassionate school cultures that nurture the overall development of learners.

Servant Leadership Theory

Servant leadership, a concept introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1977, views leaders as stewards who prioritize the needs and growth of their followers over the interests of the organization. Unlike traditional leadership styles that focus on transactions or authority, servant leadership highlights the importance of qualities such as listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and community building, as noted by Spears in 2010. These traits help leaders build trust and foster environments where individuals feel valued and supported, which is essential for comprehensive learner development.

Recent studies in organizations have shown a strong link between servant leadership and positive outcomes in wellbeing, psychological safety, and prosocial behaviours, according to Hoch et al. in 2018. In educational contexts, this leadership style has been associated with higher job satisfaction among teachers, a collaborative culture, and an ethical climate, as highlighted by van Dierendonck and Patterson in 2021. Therefore, servant leadership serves as a theoretical foundation for exploring how principals' service-oriented practices contribute to nurturing school cultures that address the emotional and moral needs of learners. A key element of servant leadership is relational caring, which focuses on building authentic connections, providing psychological support, and being emotionally present, as discussed by Eva et al. in 2019. This concept aligns with educational research on wellbeing, which emphasizes that learning environments enriched with supportive relationships can enhance students' emotional regulation, resilience, and engagement, as noted by Collie et al. in 2020. Wellbeing theory highlights that social-emotional support systems, fostered through compassionate leadership, are crucial for students' overall development and their sense of belonging in school.

Relational caring plays a crucial role in addressing the emotional challenges faced in South African communities. Given the high rates of violence and socio-economic trauma impacting students, leadership that emphasizes empathy, responsiveness, and understanding can help alleviate learner distress (Ward et al., 2022). The focus of servant leadership on empathy and active listening aligns well with the need to foster emotionally supportive environments that are essential for the holistic development of learners.

Ubuntu Philosophy: Cultural Contextualisation

Ubuntu is a philosophy rooted in African humanism, encapsulated in the idea that "I am because we are." This concept emphasises the deep connections between

individuals and the importance of communal responsibility (Tihanyi et al., 2023). Ubuntu values empathy, mutual respect, generosity, and harmony, which align closely with the principles of servant leadership. Studies show that integrating Ubuntu into leadership practices can enhance trust and promote collective wellbeing within organizations (Letseka, 2020).

In the context of South African education, Ubuntu offers a culturally relevant framework for fostering compassion and community care. When school principals embrace servant leadership behaviors inspired by Ubuntu, they create a less hierarchical and more participatory environment, which helps cultivate inclusive and relational school cultures (Mooketsi & Phaswana, 2022). The theory suggests that this cultural synergy boosts the ability of school leaders to create supportive environments for students' social and emotional growth.

Holistic Wellbeing Theory

The Holistic Wellbeing Theory suggests that true human flourishing involves several interconnected areas: emotional, social, cognitive, physical, and spiritual wellbeing (Keyes, 2007). In the context of education, this theory emphasizes the importance of nurturing the whole person rather than just concentrating on academic achievements. Wellbeing frameworks stress the significance of psychological safety, supportive relationships, and personal meaning—elements that are closely linked to compassionate leadership practices (Waters, 2020). Research indicates that school environments that foster holistic wellbeing are associated with greater learner engagement, fewer behavioral issues, and increased life satisfaction (Bakker et al., 2019). By incorporating holistic wellbeing theory into servant leadership research, we can explore how leadership practices affect learners' emotional and moral growth, beyond just their academic performance.

In Catholic education, values like compassion, service, respect for human dignity, and community align with all three theoretical pillars (Sullivan & Murphy, 2022). Servant leadership supports the Catholic mission of developing morally responsible individuals who make positive contributions to society. The concept of Ubuntu enhances this mission by placing community and relational care at the heart of educational leadership. Holistic wellbeing theory connects these value systems with outcomes that are crucial for learners' emotional and social growth.

Research methodology

This study used a qualitative phenomenological research design, which was well-suited for exploring the experiences and perceptions of Catholic school principals about servant leadership and its impact on fostering compassionate school cultures.

Phenomenology is particularly effective in understanding the subjective experiences of participants and the meanings they attach to specific phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This design enabled the researcher to gather insights from principals on leadership practices that support holistic learner development, including emotional, social, and moral growth, all while being mindful of their cultural and religious backgrounds. The approach yielded rich, detailed data that wouldn't have been possible through quantitative methods or surveys, as it prioritized the voices and experiences of the participants.

The study focused on principals from Catholic schools in South Africa. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a common strategy in qualitative research that identifies individuals with specific experiences and knowledge relevant to the research question (Etikan et al., 2016). To be included, principals needed to have at least three years of leadership experience, ensuring they had adequate exposure to school management, leadership practices, and the implementation of pastoral or wellbeing initiatives. A total of 12 principals took part in the study, representing a diverse range of urban, peri-urban, and rural schools. This sample size was considered adequate to achieve data saturation, meaning that no new themes or insights emerged from further interviews, in line with qualitative research standards (Mason, 2018). Participants were contacted through the Catholic Institute of Education office, which provided initial contact information, and all agreed to participate voluntarily.

The primary method for data collection was semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed participants to share their experiences in their own words while giving the researcher the flexibility to ask follow-up questions and clarify responses (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide featured open-ended questions that focused on the principals' understanding of servant leadership, examples of leadership practices that foster compassion and well-being, strategies for promoting holistic learner development, and the challenges faced in implementing these practices. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was recorded with the participants' consent. The audio recordings were transcribed word-for-word to ensure accuracy. Additionally, field notes were kept to capture non-verbal cues, contextual observations, and initial reflections. Furthermore, a document analysis of school policies, mission statements, pastoral care programs, and leadership development plans was conducted to enhance the interview data. This method allowed for triangulation of findings and provided insights into the institutional practices and structures that support compassionate school cultures (Bowen, 2009). By integrating interviews and document analysis, the study aimed to provide a thorough understanding of how servant leadership is expressed within Catholic schools.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, adhering to the six-step procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). This process involved becoming familiar with

the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing those themes, defining and naming them, and finally producing the report. The transcripts were read several times to pinpoint recurring patterns related to servant leadership behaviours, compassionate practices, and their effects on learners' holistic development. The codes were then organized into themes such as empathy, relational care, community building, ethical decision-making, and spiritual guidance. Additionally, the document data were coded and compared with the interview findings to determine whether there was convergence or divergence between the narratives of the principals and the institutional practices. Triangulation enhanced the credibility of the findings by cross-validating insights from various data sources.

The researcher received ethical approval for this study from the North-West University Education Faculty Ethics Committee (Ethical Clearance No. NWU-00273-22-A2). Key ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent and ensuring that participants were fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits before they provided written consent. To maintain confidentiality, the researcher anonymized participants and their schools by using pseudonyms and securely storing all data on password-protected devices. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any penalties.

Findings

Theme 1: Empathetic Presence and Relational Attentiveness

Principals emphasised that empathy—defined as a caring and attentive presence—was essential to their leadership style and the development of a compassionate school environment. Many described empathy not as a mere technique but as a daily practice woven into their interactions.

P6 articulated: "I don't just solve problems; I listen. A student once came to me in tears and didn't want solutions—she wanted to be heard. That moment changed how I approach every interaction. People need presence before they need plans."

This perspective shows that for these principals, empathy was not just a reaction but a proactive approach—an intentional focus on the emotional and lived experiences of others. Research indicates that empathetic leadership enhances psychological safety and nurtures supportive relationships (Collie et al., 2020; Ware et al., 2022). The principals in this study echoed this sentiment, noting that their presence made students and staff feel "seen, known, and valued."

P11 shared the long-term effects of being empathetic: "When learners know you will listen, they bring their whole selves. They trust that this is a place where they are respected as individuals, not just numbers or grades."

This aligns with research showing that the empathetic behaviours of servant leaders foster trust and relational safety, which are crucial for emotional well-being and a sense of belonging (Liden et al., 2020). In Catholic schools, where dignity and care are prioritised, leaders' empathetic presence reinforced these cultural values, creating environments where learners could thrive both socially and emotionally.

Principals also reflected on how empathy influenced their interactions with staff:

P2 commented as "I learned early on that leadership without listening lacks soul. Staff don't just need directions; they need to feel understood regarding the pressures they face. That care transforms how they teach and how they interact with students."

This highlights how empathy is deeply interconnected — it plays a significant role in shaping leadership culture, influencing not just individual interactions but also the broader relational norms within a group. The emphasis on empathy as a fundamental principle of servant leadership (Spears, 2010) was clearly evident in the way principals described their experiences, and it greatly fostered compassionate school environments where emotional connections and overall wellbeing were prioritized.

Theme 2: Intentional Community Building and Relational Care

Participants consistently highlighted that relational care, fostered through deliberate community-building efforts, was crucial for creating a compassionate school culture. Principals viewed servant leadership not just as a personal leadership style but as a collective practice that cultivated networks of support, mutual respect, and care.

P8 shared: "Our school is more than just a place to learn; it's a caring community. We don't merely teach lessons; we focus on building relationships. When teachers and students feel they belong, that's when compassion truly flourishes." This illustrates how servant leadership promotes relational interconnectedness, a vital aspect of Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasises shared humanity, community, and mutual support (Tihanyi et al., 2023). Principals characterised relational care as both intentional and routine, integrated into daily practices rather than being one-off events:

P3 noted as follows: "Every staff meeting starts with personal check-ins instead of announcements. We ask, 'How are you?' because we believe that learning can't occur without wellbeing."

This approach aligns with research showing that servant leadership boosts trust and community cohesion, which in turn enhances emotional wellbeing and engagement (King & Baxter, 2022). By making relational check-ins a regular practice, principals nurtured a culture of mutual care and visibility.

In discussing the importance of relational care for students, P 10 shared: "Learners know that teachers and I are here to support them not just academically, but as

whole persons. They greet me in the hall with stories, struggles, and sometimes joy — and I listen. That's compassion.". This highlights how relational care fosters a sense of belonging and trust among learners. It aligns with research that shows supportive relationships between adults and learners contribute to better emotional wellbeing and resilience (Cipriano & Brackett, 2021). The principals' stories revealed that this relational care was intentional, developed through regular interactions that conveyed acceptance, respect, and emotional support.

Relational care also reached out to families and the wider community: P5 shared in this regard as follows "We host family dialogue sessions where parents share struggles and hopes. These interactions deepen understanding and strengthen our school family. Compassion is lived when everyone feels part of the journey." This focus on community reflects studies that suggest compassionate school cultures extend beyond the classroom, fostering strong partnerships with families and caregivers, which ultimately supports holistic development (Naidoo & Beswick, 2023).

Theme 3: Faith-Infused Moral Leadership and Holistic Formation

A key feature of the leadership style among principals was their commitment to integrating faith-based values and moral development into their approach to servant leadership. The principles of Catholic identity and Catholic Social Teaching (CST) provided a foundation that anchored their leadership practices within ethical, humanistic, and spiritual contexts.

P1 noted, "Our leadership is rooted in the Gospel. Compassion is not just an addition; it is at the heart of what we do. We believe that every individual is created in the image of God."

This viewpoint illustrates how the mission and values of Catholic schools influenced principals' interpretations of servant leadership, positioning compassion as a fundamental obligation rather than merely a professional skill. The principals shared how they intentionally wove faith practices—such as prayer, reflection, liturgy, and moral discussions—into the daily life of the school:

P7 noted "We start each day with intentions focused on kindness and empathy. Students understand that faith isn't confined to one hour of religion class; it's something that should be reflected in every choice and interaction."

This approach aligns with research suggesting that leadership grounded in spirituality fosters moral development and character building, extending beyond academic knowledge to include emotional and ethical growth (Grace, 2020; Sullivan & Murphy, 2022). The stories shared by the principals indicated that incorporating faith into their leadership practices empowered students' moral agency, encouraging self-reflection, ethical reasoning, and compassionate actions.

Participants also highlighted community-oriented practices inspired by CST, such as service projects and social justice efforts: P4 shared his point on this: "Servant leadership in our school involves actively reaching out to those in need, not just discussing our values but putting them into action. Our students lead food drives, care visits, and community support initiatives—showing compassion in real ways."

The practices observed in Catholic schools show that servant leadership was focused on encouraging students to connect with the wider community in a compassionate way. This aligns with research indicating that engaging in moral and civic activities helps students develop a sense of purpose, social responsibility, and overall growth (O'Keefe & Kopko, 2022). By fostering service and building relationships, principals illustrated how their leadership not only influenced the school culture but also played a crucial role in shaping students' identities as compassionate change-makers.

Theme 4: Contextual Challenges and Adaptive Leadership Practices

While principals strongly emphasised the positive effects of servant leadership, they also pointed out significant challenges in maintaining compassionate cultures. These challenges included limited resources, systemic pressures, teacher burnout, and the competing demands of academic performance.

P5 articulated as follows: "We want compassion every moment, but when teachers are overwhelmed by workloads, it becomes hard to sustain that attention to emotional needs," one principal noted". This aligns with broader educational research indicating that structural and contextual pressures can hinder relational and wellbeing-oriented leadership (McGrath & Noble, 2022).

Principals also described the personal toll of leading with compassion: P12 shared her thoughts as follows: "Sometimes I forget my own wellbeing while caring for others. Leadership is compassionate, but leaders also need compassion".

This highlights the connection between personal resilience and servant leadership, emphasising that leaders must maintain their emotional resources for compassionate cultures to flourish. Research supports this notion, indicating that servant leadership requires both empathy and self-care to prevent burnout (Shula, 2023; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2021).

This points to the intersection of personal resilience and servant leadership — highlighting that leaders' emotional resources must be sustained for compassionate cultures to thrive. Research supports this, noting that servant leadership requires both empathy and self-care to avoid burnout (Shula, 2023; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2021).

To address these challenges, principals developed intentional strategies: P3 noted as follows: "We schedule time for pastoral care during the week, so it's not optional or sidelined. We protect that time as fiercely as we protect curriculum time,"

This shows that while servant leadership is relational and value-driven, it also needs to be strategic and disciplined to endure systemic pressures. These adaptive strategies resonate with leadership research that emphasizes resilience, planning, and boundary-setting as essential for sustaining relationally oriented school cultures (Naidoo & Beswick, 2023).

Additionally, principals highlighted the necessity for broader institutional and policy support: P8 shared "We can't do this alone. Education departments and church authorities need to support wellbeing initiatives with resources and training, not just slogans".

This shows that while individual principals can implement servant leadership practices, creating sustainable and compassionate school cultures requires structural support and systemic alignment. This includes professional development, wellbeing resources, and policies that prioritise emotional health alongside academic success (Collie et al., 2020; Ware et al., 2022). Throughout the various themes, principals described servant leadership as a holistic, relational, and value-driven approach that shapes school cultures to support learners as whole individuals. Empathy, relational care, faith-based moral guidance, and adaptive strategies all played a role in fostering environments where emotional wellbeing, moral agency, and social growth were at the forefront.

The practices of principals echoed the Ubuntu philosophy, which highlights shared humanity, relational interconnectedness, and collective wellbeing (Tihanyi et al., 2023). By emphasising communal care and dignity, servant leadership practices reinforced cultural and moral values that hold significant meaning in the South African context. The findings also indicated that when servant leadership is genuinely practiced, it enhances learners' social-emotional skills, moral reasoning, and civic engagement—outcomes that go beyond academic achievement to promote overall student flourishing.

Discussion of findings

The aim of this study was to investigate how servant leadership fosters compassionate school cultures in South African Catholic schools, ultimately supporting the holistic development of learners. Based on insights from school principals, the findings highlighted how practices of servant leadership—anchored in empathy, relational care, faith-based values, and adaptability to context—helped create nurturing school environments that cater to learners' emotional, social, moral, and spiritual needs. This

discussion connects these themes to the existing body of literature on educational leadership, servant leadership, and culturally relevant leadership models pertinent to South African and faith-based settings.

Empathy as a Cornerstone of Compassionate School Culture

One of the main takeaways from this study was how crucial empathetic presence is in the leadership styles of principals. Participants emphasised that being empathetic means actively and intentionally listening, along with being emotionally attentive methods that made both students and staff feel appreciated and supported. For example, principals recounted how being genuinely present and listening carefully helped students feel safe enough to express themselves. These results align with recent research that recognizes empathy as a vital leadership skill and a significant factor in fostering positive school environments and building trust (Louis & Murphy, 2023; Van der Vyver & Khumalo, 2022).

Empathy is widely acknowledged as a key element of servant and ethical leadership, where leaders focus on the needs, feelings, and well-being of those they serve (Eva et al., 2019; Spears, 2022). New studies in educational leadership suggest that empathetic and caring leadership practices lead to higher teacher morale, greater professional commitment, and stronger interpersonal trust within schools (Leithwood et al., 2020; Bush & Glover, 2024). This study builds on those findings by showing that empathy not only enhances staff well-being but also fosters a sense of safety, belonging, and emotional security for students.

Empathetic leadership is closely connected to modern approaches in social-emotional learning (SEL) and inclusive education, which highlight the significance of emotional well-being for engaging learners, building resilience, and achieving academic success (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; OECD, 2021). When principals show empathy in their interactions with students, they create school environments that encourage emotional expression, enhance coping skills, and foster respect and dignity—essential elements for comprehensive learner development.

Relational Care and Communal Bonding in Schools

Another key takeaway from the findings was the focus on intentional relational care—practices that foster trust, dignity, and a sense of connection among members of the school community. Principals shared rituals like wellbeing check-ins, pastoral care sessions, and open conversations with both teachers and students as integral to their daily leadership approach. They stressed that compassion is something that "is lived," not merely stated, through ongoing, relational engagement. This aligns with research indicating that servant leaders nurture relational environments defined

by trust and community, which in turn promote shared responsibility and group cohesion (Swart et al., 2022). In South Africa, the concept of Ubuntu further strengthens this relationality, emphasising communal humanity and interdependence. Ubuntu's philosophy, often expressed as "I am because we are," highlights the shared responsibility that adults and learners have for each other's wellbeing (Tihanyi et al., 2023). The principals in this study illustrated leadership practices that reflect these values—focusing on mutual respect, shared challenges, and collective care. The relational care practices rooted in Ubuntu and servant leadership created inclusive spaces where learners felt a sense of belonging and respect. Research indicates that such environments not only enhance emotional wellbeing but also boost engagement and motivation for learning (CASEL, 2020). Therefore, relational care practices are not just about emotions; they play a crucial role in shaping students' engagement with learning, collaboration, and peer support.

Faith-Infused Leadership and Moral Formation

A significant aspect of this study was how school principals integrated faith-based values with servant leadership practices to promote moral and spiritual well-being. The participants grounded their leadership in Catholic Social Teaching (CST), which highlights the importance of human dignity, solidarity, and service (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). These principles closely align with servant leadership, which focuses on the well-being of others, ethical responsibility, and community development (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010).

The impact of faith in leadership was clear in the principals' stories about how they wove prayer, moral reflection, and service initiatives into the daily life of their schools. They discussed how they aligned their school visions with Gospel values of compassion and care, which influenced their pastoral practices, ethical decision-making, and community service efforts. These practices embody the Catholic view of education as a comprehensive endeavour that goes beyond just cognitive development to include moral and spiritual growth (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2017; Groome, 2011). By fostering these aspects, school leaders contribute to the overall development of their students.

This observation is in line with current research on leadership in Catholic education. Scholars suggest that leadership in Catholic schools is fundamentally moral and mission-oriented, necessitating the blending of faith values with educational practices to support the intellectual, moral, social, and spiritual growth of students (Dantley, 2005; Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012). From this viewpoint, servant leadership transcends a mere theoretical management style; it embodies a lived expression of faith and mission, where leaders act as moral role models and deliberately create environments that uphold ethical and Gospel values (Greenleaf, 1977; Sendjaya, 2015). Moreover, connecting servant leadership with religious values helps maintain

consistency between a school's stated Catholic identity and its daily operations. When leadership behaviours genuinely reflect the institution's values, both students and staff are more inclined to embrace and practice these values, promoting meaningful and sustainable holistic development within the school community (Sergiovanni, 1992; Sullivan, 2018).

Challenges and Adaptive Servant Leadership

Despite the benefits of servant leadership, principals faced significant challenges in maintaining compassionate school cultures. These challenges included teacher burnout, heavy workloads, limited resources, and the pressure to meet academic performance standards. While principals recognized that servant leadership practices fostered positive relationships and moral values within the school, they also noted that systemic pressures often hindered their ability to implement these practices effectively. This aligns with research that points out the contextual limitations on leadership practices. Studies indicate that structural issues, like workload demands and insufficient institutional support, can restrict relational leadership and the adoption of wellbeing-focused practices (Swart et al., 2022; Makirimani & Naicker, 2025). In South Africa's historically unequal educational environment, these pressures are particularly intense, necessitating that leaders be adaptable, resilient, and strategic in balancing relational priorities with performance expectations.

In response to these challenges, principals employed adaptive strategies, such as intentionally scheduling time for pastoral care, coaching staff on wellbeing practices, and engaging in reflective leadership development. These strategies demonstrate that servant leadership is not merely passive or idealistic; it requires a strategic approach to create space for compassion within the constraints of institutional frameworks. Emerging literature on leadership highlights the importance of adaptive leadership in managing complexity, emphasizing that leaders must juggle competing priorities while upholding core values and practices (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009; cited in recent educational research). In this study's context, the adaptations made by principals show that servant leadership can be both dynamic and responsive to the context, rather than being static or solely driven by values disconnected from systemic challenges.

Servant Leadership, Moral Agency, and Holistic Outcomes

The findings indicate that servant leadership practices play a significant role in fostering compassionate cultures that promote the overall development of learners. This development includes emotional wellbeing, social connections, moral growth, and spiritual enrichment. Experiences shared by principals reveal that compassionate leadership helps create safe spaces where learners feel appreciated and supported, which is essential for their engagement in both academic pursuits and life skills.

Research in educational psychology and leadership theory highlights the necessity of such supportive environments. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) points out that nurturing emotional and social skills enhances learners' resilience, teamwork, and academic achievements. The servant leadership practices of principals align with these evidence-based frameworks, establishing cultures that prioritize the comprehensive development of students. Moreover, the integration of Ubuntu, servant leadership, and Catholic values offers a culturally and spiritually cohesive model that addresses the relational and moral aspects of education. Research conducted in South African contexts emphasizes the significance of leadership practices that respect community values while fostering wellbeing and inclusivity (Tihanyi et al., 2023). This study adds to that conversation, showing that culturally relevant servant leadership can improve both relational environments and the overall outcomes for learners.

Conclusion

This study looked into how servant leadership practices can foster compassionate school cultures within Catholic education, aiming to support the overall development of learners, particularly from the viewpoint of South African school principals. The motivation behind this research stems from the understanding that effective school leadership goes beyond just administrative tasks; it also involves ethical, emotional, and relational aspects that significantly impact students' social, moral, and academic growth. Catholic schools, being faith-based, have a unique opportunity to weave spiritual, moral, and relational guidance into their leadership approaches, reflecting values like empathy, community responsibility, and care for those in need. However, the South African educational landscape poses specific challenges, such as limited resources, socio-economic inequalities, and systemic pressures, which can hinder school leaders' efforts to maintain compassionate environments. This study aimed to explore how principals tackle these challenges while creating supportive spaces for holistic learner development.

The research employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to gather insights into principals' experiences and views on servant leadership in action. Through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, principals shared valuable perspectives on how their leadership styles influenced school cultures, fostered emotional and moral growth, and addressed the needs of both students and staff. Thematic analysis of the findings uncovered four interconnected themes: the importance of empathetic presence in fostering compassion, the role of relational care in servant leadership, the integration of faith in moral and spiritual development, and the obstacles to maintaining compassionate cultures. These themes highlight how servant leadership functions as a complex practice, blending personal, relational, and value-driven elements to enhance holistic learner development. The findings revealed that having

an empathetic presence is crucial for compassionate leadership. Principals stressed the significance of active listening, being fully engaged, and providing genuine emotional support to both students and staff. By embodying empathy, they fostered a sense of psychological safety in their schools, enabling individuals to voice their needs and feel recognised. This emphasis on presence extended beyond just addressing problems or handling administrative tasks; it reflected a thoughtful and ongoing commitment to understanding and supporting the emotional experiences of the school community. Principals observed that these practices-built trust, strengthened relationships, and enhanced student engagement, showing that compassion is both a moral obligation and a practical aspect of effective leadership.

Another key theme that emerged was relational care. Principals explained that servant leadership meant prioritising relationships, fostering collaborative environments, and consistently modelling ethical behaviour. Activities like regular check-ins with staff, mentorship initiatives, and pastoral care routines illustrated a relational leadership style that honours the dignity and well-being of every individual. They highlighted that these practices not only contributed to teachers' job satisfaction and emotional resilience but also nurtured a culture where students felt acknowledged, valued, and included. The findings suggest that relational care serves as a vital mechanism for embedding compassionate school cultures, influencing daily interactions, norms, and expectations.

Participants consistently pointed out that faith-based values and moral development are essential to servant leadership in Catholic schools. Principals noted that their leadership styles were deeply rooted in Gospel teachings and Catholic Social Doctrine, weaving moral, ethical, and spiritual guidance into their daily activities and interactions. This approach ensured that compassion was not just a policy or strategy but a tangible aspect of the school culture. Students engaged in moral education through structured activities like reflective exercises and service projects, as well as through everyday interactions with leaders and staff who exemplified ethical behaviour and care. Principals stressed that this connection between faith, leadership, and culture nurtured holistic growth by addressing cognitive, emotional, social, and moral aspects simultaneously.

However, despite these positive practices, principals faced significant challenges in maintaining compassionate cultures. Issues like teacher burnout, heavy workloads, and systemic pressures often hindered the implementation of relational and pastoral initiatives. They acknowledged that sustaining servant leadership necessitated intentional self-care, resilience, and strategic planning to balance administrative responsibilities with relational and moral duties. The study underscored that servant leadership is a dynamic and adaptable practice, requiring ongoing negotiation between ethical obligations, institutional priorities, and the realities of the context.

This study convincingly shows that servant leadership is a powerful approach to creating compassionate, inclusive, and ethically sound school cultures. The experiences of

principals reveal that empathy, caring relationships, and moral actions guided by faith play a crucial role in the overall development of students, which includes their emotional health, social skills, moral growth, and academic involvement. The research emphasises that compassionate leadership is a shared responsibility, requiring a deliberate focus, flexibility, and a commitment to values like care, dignity, and interconnectedness. Ultimately, the study points out the transformative power of servant leadership in Catholic education. Principals act as ethical role models and create supportive environments, proving that leadership based on compassion and faith can foster schools that support the development of the whole student. Although there are still challenges to face, the findings provide a framework for promoting sustainable, value-driven, and learner-centred educational practices, highlighting the importance of human dignity, empathy, and moral purpose in shaping the future of Catholic education in South Africa.

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