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The relationship between school principals and teachers servant leadership

Margarita Pilkiene^{a*}, ISM University of Management and Economics, 63100, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Jolanta Morkunaite^b, ISM University of Management and Economics, 63100, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Alisa Miniotaite^c, ISM University of Management and Economics, 63100, Vilnius, Lithuania.

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Abstract

The theory of servant leadership is one of the recognized modern approaches to leadership phenomenon, but more empirical evidence is needed to develop this concept further. Little research of servant leadership is done in the research field of educational leadership in various contexts. In this paper the analysis is made, establishing the connection between the school principals' and teachers' servant leadership in Lithuanian educational context. The literature analysis reveals, that there is an interaction between school principals' and teachers' servant leadership. The model of Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) was taken as a basis for research. The quantitative empirical research was conducted, which involved participation of heads of schools, teachers and pupils in the survey (N= 889). Statistical factor analysis and regression analysis were made. The results of the analysis revealed that servant leadership construct in Lithuanian schools differs from Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) theoretical model. New factor of teachers servant leadership construct – development/coaching - was added.

Keywords: School, teachers, leadership.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Margarita Pilkiene**^{a*}, ISM University of Management and Economics, 63100, Vilnius, Lithuania.

E-mail address: margarita.pilkiene@ism.lt / Tel.: +370 5 212 3960

1. Introduction

The concept of servant leadership is not new. It is interrelated with some ideas of Christianity and lives of such influential leaders as Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King and others (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Literature of leadership and management started to analyze the construct about 50 years ago. The concept was explored and tested by many outstanding researchers, explaining the antecedents and consequences of servant leadership, its context and impact on employee behaviors in organizations. Nevertheless, the analysis of modern state of research shows, that there is little empirical evidence for servant leadership in educational setting, at school, in various contexts. It is not established, how the servant leadership interrelates across the levels of educational organization. The aim of this paper is to identify the relation between the school principals' and teachers' servant leadership at schools of Lithuania. Pursuing this aim, we will perform the analysis the construct of servant leadership through literature review, report the findings of empirically, by quantitative research, measured relation between school principals' and teachers' servant leadership and finally, interpret the data and end up with discussion.

2. Literature review

The concept of servant leadership. There is plethora of research on leadership. Scholars explore variety of theoretical approaches to leadership phenomena, such as trait, behavioral, contingency, path-goal, situational, cognitive resource, leader-follower, transactional and transformational, authentic leadership, participative and distributed leadership p – just to mention few. The theory of servant leadership has its origins in Robert Greenleaf (1970) research. He has made an assumption, that “The servant leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (Greenleaf, 1970). The question was brought in, whether the servant leader allows the person to grow? Are followers becoming healthier, smarter, more free and autonomous? Greenleaf expanded the field of leadership research, asking if the leader can exercise his/her power as a source to serve others, and as a possibility to create the serving organization. According to Russel (2001), this was a strong call to draw the attention of scholars to qualities and values of a servant leader (Russel, 2001), to suggest models of behavior (Buchen, 1998; Patterson, 2003; Winston, 2003; Wong & Page, 2003), to compare servant leadership with other leadership theories (Farling, Stone & Winston, 1999; Stone, Russell & Patterson, 2004; Winston & Hartsfield, 2004), to provide the typology of servant leadership (Laub, 1999), to explain its practical implications (Greenleaf, 1997; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Spears, 1995; Spears, 2010; Winston & Hartsfield, 2004), etc. The relevance of servant leadership theory was emphasized by Crippen (2005), who claimed, that paradigm of traditional hierarchical pyramid of power has changed. Traditional approach saw the leader on the top of a pyramid, making the decisions from top down (Magoni, 2003). The view of a servant leader is opposite – he is at the bottom of the pyramid. According to Hall (2007), servant leadership is not based on „from top down“ principle. It focuses on cooperation, trust, empathy and ethical application of power. Servant leader seeks to make informed decisions, keeping interests of others in his heart and mind, he does not seek to increase his personal power. The purpose of him is to grow the personalities in organization, to increase the involvement of individuals and teams into continuous improvement and change (Hall, 2007).

Scholars provide broad research on dimensions of servant leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Liden et al., 2008; Parolini, Patterson & Winston, 2009; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Multidimensional model, explored by Page and Wong (2000) provide 12 features, which were tested empirically and grouped into 4 main functional areas. Later research of the same authors (Page & Wong, 2003) accepted opponent-process model and identified seven factors of servant leadership: 1: Empowering and developing others; 2: Power and pride (vulnerability and humility); 3: Serving others; 4: Open, participatory leadership; 5: Inspiring leadership; 6: Visionary leadership; 7: Courageous leadership (integrity and authenticity). Research of Russel and Stone (2002) identified nine functional features of servant leadership and 11 additional qualities, such as vision, honesty, integrity, trust, complaisance, empowerment and other. Further research was addressing the empirical testing issues, such as

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Sendjaya (2005), who emphasized, that servant leadership is a multidimensional concept with six empirically distinguishable dimensions: Voluntary Subordination, Authentic Self, Covenantal Relationship, Responsible Morality, Transcendental Spirituality, and Transforming Influence. Another piece of empirical research was conducted by Van Dierendonck and Heeren (2006). Based on the findings of Page and Wong (2000), Laub (1999), Sendjaya (2003), Van Dierendonck and Heeren (2006) explained the servant leadership construct in three levels. The first level is personal: the internal strengths of a servant leader (integrity, authenticity, courage, objectivity and humility). Second level is interpersonal (empowerment, emotional intelligence). Third level is organizational, containing stewardship and conviction. This research got a broad resonance and was tested in various countries (the Netherlands, UK, Finland, Portugal, Germany). The servant leadership model was further specified and in the version of Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) has eight dimensions: authenticity, courage, empowerment and development, standing back, humility, accountability, interpersonal acceptance/forgiveness and stewardship. The eight-dimensional model of Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) was applied to the empirical research of this paper.

Servant leadership at a school. The phenomenon of leadership is closely related with a mission of education, with the context of region and school itself. The educational leadership research is plentiful, as leadership is one of the main success factors of creating and implementing schools vision. As Pont, Nusche and Mormant (2008) emphasize: not only one person can lead. Leadership may be distributed among many people, who work at school or beyond it. Leadership at school can involve persons, who perform various roles and functions, they are principals, vice principals, assistants, group leaders, members of the board of a school and employees, who have leadership tasks (Pont, Nusche & Mormant, 2008).

Internationally, focus on servant leadership is found in literature, which explores the phenomenon of leadership in catholic schools (Crippen, 2005; Black, 2010; Spangeviciute et al., 2009). The authors claim, that servant leadership is the most relevant leadership theory, when exploring catholic schools. Other research stream is not taking religion into consideration, but aim to identify the interrelation of servant leadership and other variables. For example, Black (2010) identified the relationship between school principals and teachers servant leadership and school climate. He concludes, that positive school climate can be created and maintained, using the principles of servant leadership. According to Russell and Stone (2002), servant leadership at school creates a culture of cooperation, people plan, discuss or criticize together. Accepted responsibility and continuous attempts for improvement encourage the teachers to learn together and to build learning communities. Babb (2012) has looked at relationship between servant leadership and school effectiveness. He concludes, that organizational factors of servant leadership has comparatively smaller impact on schools effectiveness, than social, economic and national factors, which have a big impact on learning achievements of students. Quite a few scholars pay their attention to relationship of servant leadership and attitudes of employees, such as work satisfaction or organizational commitment, for example, Laub (1999), Drury, (2004), Letting, (2004). Cerit (2009) has identified the strong positive relation between principals' servant leadership and job satisfaction of teachers. Servant leadership, according to Cerit (2009), is a strong predictor of job satisfaction at school.

Thus, servant leadership theory is developed and empirically tested in school setting, explored variables being school culture, microclimate, employee job satisfaction, commitment, citizenship behavior, professional growth and learning of a leader, student's achievement improvement and other.

Nevertheless, servant leadership research in educational settings in various contexts is lacking attention of scholars. In the context of Lithuania's education system is was not explored at all. Only one research was carried on, establishing the relationship between principals servant leadership and teachers organizational citizenship (Miezelis, 2014) in Lithuanian schools. The relationship between school principals' and teachers' servant leadership in Lithuanian schools remains unidentified. As the aim of this paper is to identify the relation between the school principals'and teachers' servant

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leadership at schools of Lithuania, the quantitative empirical research was carried on. As a basis for it, the model of Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) was used.

3. Empirical Research

The aim of the research is to identify empirically the relation between the school principals' and teachers' servant leadership at schools of Lithuania. Based on the aim, the quantitative research design was chosen, and the following objectives were raised: to assess the validity of research instrument, to identify the factors of servant leadership applying factor analysis, to identify the relationship between the school's principals and teachers servant leadership statistically and to provide the model, explaining the relation between principal's and teacher's servant leadership.

As discussed in literature review, scholars continue to develop the servant leadership construct, and together with it - research instruments, which are applied for empirical testing. There is a list of published one-dimensional (Laub, 1999; Ehrhart, 2004) and multidimensional (Page & Wong, 2000; Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Wong & Davey, 2007; Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya, Sarros & Santora, 2008; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011) instruments. For this research the instrument of Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) was chosen. It was back-forward translated into Lithuanian language and validated in Miezelis (2014) research of school principal's servant leadership and teachers organizational citizenship behavior. Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) give a permission to use instrument in their paper, so additional permissions were not obtained.

The questionnaire contains four parts: school principals self-assessment of servant leadership, teachers assessment of servant leadership of principals, teachers self-assessment of servant leadership and students assessment of teachers servant leadership. In addition to original 30 questions of Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), another 30 questions were added, as well as demographic questions (gender, age, work tenure, workload and school size). The original Likert 6 range scale was expanded to 7 ranges, seeking to obtain more precise data (Dawes, 2008). Cronbach alfa for questionnaire's internal consistency was measured, giving 0.90-096 result, $p < 0.001$.

Convenience sampling method was used, inviting all principals, teachers and students of secondary schools (primary schools were not invited) of Lithuania to take part in the research. There were 1035 secondary schools, and the same number of school principals, 35037 teachers and 32747 students in 2015 in Lithuania. It was recommended, that only students of 14-17 years take part in the research.

The invitation was sent electronically to all secondary schools. It was open one month. After filled in questionnaires returned, 891 were proved as suitable for further analysis. Demographic data of participants are: 40 principals (65% women, 35% men), average age 51 year, ranging from 30 to 74. 315 teachers (93% woman, 7% men), average age 46 years, ranging from 25 to 68 years. 536 students (62% girls, 38% boys), average age 16 years. As demographic data are not exclusive, they were not taken into further calculations.

Data were tested by Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure, principals data $KMO = 0.555$, teachers data $KMO = 0.906$, students $KMO = 0.945$, $p < 0.001$. Data were confirmed as suitable for factor analysis procedure. The Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) model contains 8 dimensions, the data was organized as follows:

Table 1. Servant leadership factor data

<i>SL dimensions</i>	<i>No.of questions</i>	<i>Questions assessing others (1-30)</i>	<i>Self-assessment questions(31-60)</i>
Empowerment	14	1, 2, 3, 4, 12, 20, 27	31, 32, 33, 34, 42, 50, 57
Accountability	6	6, 14, 22	36, 44, 52
Humility	10	10, 18, 25, 29, 30	40, 48, 55, 59, 60
Standing back	6	5, 13, 21	35, 43, 51
Authenticity	8	9, 17, 24, 28	39, 47, 54, 58
Courage	4	8, 16,	38, 46
Forgiveness	6	7, 15, 23	37, 45, 53
Stewardship	6	11,19, 26	41, 49, 56

Factor load calculation on dimensions of student servant leadership showed, that 4 factors have the highest loads: forgiveness (0.588), courage (0.670), empowerment (0.692) and humility (0.627). The details per scale item are provided in Annex 1.

Factor load calculation on dimension of teacher servant leadership resulted in 6 factors: development/coaching (0.751), empowerment (0,681), forgiveness (0,590), courage (0.685), humility (0.515) and standing back (0.712). The details per scale item are provided in Annex 2.

Factor load calculation on principal's servant leadership resulted in 3 factors: empowerment and development (0.723), courage (0.645), humility (0.700). The details per scale item are provided in Annex 3.

The internal consistency of all scales was tested again. Cronbach alfa for principals servant leadership instrument (3 factors), was 0.779, teachers servant leadership (4 factors) was 0.733, students servant leadership instrument (6 factors) was 0.887.

Further statistical correlation analysis was made, aiming to predict the servant leadership of principals, teachers and students based on their self-assessment. Correlation analysis was applied, aiming to calculate the probability that an increase in self-assessment results of servant leadership will correlate with an increase in the assessment of servant leadership of others.

Linear correlation and regression between student self-assessment and assessment of others servant leadership (N=536) resulted as: $r=0.6$, $R^2=0.375$, $p<0.01$). The linear regression equation is: $y=2.378+0.563*x$, where x is students self-assessment of servant leadership average points, y is student's assessment of servant leadership of others.

Linear correlation and regression between teachers self-assessment and assessment of others servant leadership (N=315) resulted as: $r=0.4$, $R^2=0.427$, $p<0.01$). The linear regression equation is: $y=3.744+0.384*x$, where x is teachers self-assessment of servant leadership average points, y is teachers assessment of servant leadership of others.

Linear correlation and regression between principals self-assessment and assessment of others servant leadership (N=40) resulted as: $r=0.57$, $R^2=0.427$, $p<0.01$). The linear regression equation is: $y=3.711+0.313*x$, where x is principals self-assessment of servant leadership average points, y is principals assessment of servant leadership of others. Broader conclusions can not be made because of limited sample size (N=40).

The correction of the theoretical model; based on empirical research data, the corrected servant leadership dimensions in school is proposed. The dimensions are:

for principals servant leadership: empowerment, courage, humility;

for teachers servant leadership: development/coaching, empowerment, forgiveness, courage, humility, standing back;

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for students servant leadership: empowerment, forgiveness, courage, humility.

The new dimension in teachers servant leadership – development/coaching is added. The theoretical model should be explored further, applying both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

4. Discussion

Analysis of current state of research of servant leadership literature leads to conclusion, that scholars have dedicated a lot of attention both to theory development and its empirical testing of the construct. Servant leadership research was carried out in educational settings, too. The relationship between principals servant leadership and school's climate, students' achievement, job satisfaction of teachers, organizational citizenship were proved. Nevertheless, the theoretic model for the relationship between schools principals and teachers servant leadership was not investigated. Based on this paper research, the conclusion is made, that the servant leadership at school is the entire expression of principals', teachers' and students servant leadership. The important new dimension of teachers servant leadership is development/coaching dimension.

This research applied valid and reliable questionnaire of Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). It was expanded up to 60 questions from original 30 questions, the sample was principals, teachers and students of secondary schools of Lithuania (N=891). Based on data analysis, the corrected model of servant leadership was suggested. It contains 6 dimensions, which distribute differently among principals, teachers and students. The corrected scales are internally consistent. Cronbach alfa for students servant leadership scales is -0.887, teachers – 0.733, principals – 0.779. The strength of correlation between servant leadership self-assessment and assessment of others was calculated, the statistically reliable average strong correlation was identified in samples of teachers and students. The correlation of self-assessment of principals servant leadership and servant leadership of others is average strength, too.

The three dimensions of servant leadership overlap, they are: empowerment, courage and humility. The new dimension of teachers servant leadership - development/coaching - was confirmed. The relationship between teachers and the school is based on mutual trust, harmony and deep acceptance of moral values, but is still little researched. The authors encourage other researchers to empirically explore the construct of servant leadership further both qualitatively and quantitatively.

The servant leadership theory has high potential to influence behaviors of school settings. It is supported by feeling of community of principals, teachers and students. School leaders and teachers should support the culture of moral values, common purpose, professional calling, mutual trust and respect, active listening, authentic feedback, understanding and altruism.

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