# Learners' Perceptions of Servant-Leadership in Classrooms
## — Kong Wah Chan

The term "servant-leadership" was coined by Robert Greenleaf (1970) through his collection of essays titled *The Servant as Leader*. His message is that the best leader is first a servant. Beazley (2003) described servant-leadership as an art, a calling, a way of being, and a philosophy of life. Hence, it is not modern theory of leadership and management technique but rather the process of serving, and the development of the led, who are being served. Omoh (2007) considered that the results of servant-leadership include follower-empowerment as well as mutual trust and collaboration between the servant-leader and the led. More specifically, Hays (2008) argued that the applications of servant-leadership principles can "make a profound difference on the impact of learning and in the learning experience of both students and teachers" (p.113).

The researcher agrees with Hays that the belief of servant-leadership is in alignment with the purpose of education in school. The researcher's position is that those teachers, who choose to be servant-leaders, serve the needs of learners in

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classrooms, and in partnership with learners, create a learner-centered community operating with servant-leadership principles. This study seeks to explore the application of servant-leadership in meeting the cognitive, social, individual and motivational needs of learners in classrooms of a Hong Kong school.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The imagery of a servant-leader is contradictory to the stereotypical dominating figure of a leader.

> The servant-leader is servant first. . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. . . . The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. (Greenleaf, 1970, p.13)

Its essence is hidden in the hyphenation between the word 'servant' and 'leader'. Such punctuation highlights the fluid and hybrid nature of a servant-leader. Trompenaars and Voerman (2009) pointed out that the word *servant* is not a modifier of the word *leader*. *Servant – leader* is a compound noun. The two roles have equal values and are intrinsically linked. Blanchard (2007) described the blending of these two extremes as such:

> In the visionary role, leaders define the direction. It's their responsibility to communicate what the organization stands for and wants to accomplish . . . Once people are clear on where they are going, the leader's role shifts to a service mindset for the task of implementation. (p.250)

In summary, a servant-leader casts a vision and supports its implementation. The true test of a servant-leader as posted by Greenleaf (1970) is that the led "become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants" (p.13).

*Characteristics of a Servant-Leader*

Spears (2010) distilled Greenleaf's original writings into 10 characteristics of servant-leaders. A servant-leader is characterized with the following attributes and desires to develop these traits while serving others. In the latter part of the list, Barbuto and Wheelers' (2002) and Patterson's (2003) work are supplementary to highlight the character development of servant-leaders.

*Listening.* Listening is more than a technique, but an attitude and a desire to understand what is said and not said. A servant-leader listens to others and pays attention to his/her inner voice. "Listening, coupled with periods of reflection, is essential to the growth and well-being of the servant leader" (Spears, 2010, p.27).

*Empathy.* A servant-leader is empathetic of others, demonstrating acceptance and understanding. A servant-leader assumes the good intention of others even when they may not meet the expected performance. A servant-leader values and shows respect for the uniqueness, in terms of intrinsic worth, of individuals. "The most successful servant leaders are those who have become skilled empathetic listeners" (Spears, 2010, p.27).

*Healing.* A servant-leader assumes responsibility in mending broken relationships and bringing healing to those who are emotionally hurt and broken-spirited. Such restoration sets free one's potential for transformation and further development. A servant-leader inspires the led in a shared search for wholeness. "One of the great strengths of servant leadership is the potential for healing one's self and one's relationship to others" (Spears, 2010, p.27).

*Awareness.* A servant-leader evaluates a situation holistically from complementary and contradictory perspectives, aiming to develop insights. Although a servant-leader is not a solace seeker, he/she maintains his/her inner-serenity through solitude which leads to self-awareness. The development of general and self-awareness gives a servant-leader a clear sense of priorities, distinguishing between the important from the urgent and achieving optimal results. "Awareness helps one in understanding issues involving ethics, power, and values. It lends itself to being able to view most situations from a more integrated, holistic position" (Spears, 2010, p.27).

*Persuasion.* A servant-leader convinces instead of coerces others into compliance. "This particular element offers one of the clearest distinctions between the traditional authoritarian model and that of servant leadership" (Spears, 2010, p.28). Greenleaf (1970) illustrated the approach and action of persuasion through the example of John Woolman, an American Quaker who made an influential impact on the members of the Society of Friends (Quaker) on the

abandonment of slavery. John Woolman travelled long distances by foot or horseback visiting slaveholders. He did not accuse but persuaded people one by one with his gentle and non-judgement arguments. His method of persuasion was proven to be effective and no Quakers were slave-owners by 1770 after his thirty enduring years of ministry.

*Conceptualization.* Spears (2010) discussed that "servant leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day operational approach" (p.28). A servant-leader is expected to cultivate conceptual thinking ability. However, it is easy for a leader to be consumed by the day-to-day operational demand and the expectation of meeting short-term goals. If so, a leader may lose sight of the big picture or fail to develop and then articulate the vision of an institute. A servant-leader needs to be a visionary and sharpen his/her vision continually. Conceptual thinking skill can be acquired but it requires a disciplined mind with purposeful practice.

*Foresight.* Foresight was described by Spears (2010) as "a characteristic that enables the servant leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future" (p.28). Foresight allows a servant-leader to make ethical choices and avoid future failure. The ability of foresight is considered to be embedded in one's own intuition. Greenleaf (1970) argued that foresight is the "lead" element of a leader. Without foresight, a leader is in name only. Foresight allows the leader to see the unforeseeable and to know the unknowable so that he/she holds

more information than others. With foresight, a leader leads others towards the next step. Without foresight, a leader merely responds or reacts to the current situation.

*Stewardship.* Barbuto and Wheeler (2002) described a steward in the medieval times as one who was assigned to prepare the prince for his reign. The steward was entrusted with valuable assets because of his/her proven dedication and commitment. This implies that a servant-leader, as a steward, is entrusted to prepare others for betterment. In addition, a servant-leader is held accountable for the success of the organization as well as its relationship to and impacts on the society. Stewardship is a great responsibility, moving from individual to societal obligation.

*Commitment to the growth of people.* A commitment to the growth of people requires a servant-leader to possess a growth mindset, and a belief that people can gain new understanding and reach greater accomplishment. A servant-leader models on-going learning and encourages others to acquire new knowledge and skills. Such commitment compels a servant-leader to find ways in supporting others' personal, professional, and spiritual development (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2002). Spears (2010) suggested "concrete actions such as making funds available for personal and professional development, taking a personal interest in the ideas and suggestions from everyone, encouraging worker involvement in decision-making" (p.29). A servant-leader mentors others to become servant-leaders (Patterson, 2003).

*Building community.* A servant-leader desires that

individuals find their sense of belonging in a community. In a community operating with servant-leadership principles, members value and connect to each other. They can draw support among themselves in their niche. As the size of an organization grows, a servant-leader needs to apply concerted effort to build supportive networks with their led. Greenleaf (1970) and Spears (2010) believed that community building is vital to healthy institutional living and servant-leaders are responsible to nurture people's communal needs.

From the overview of these 10 characteristics of servant-leaders, the researcher is interested in its application in the context of classrooms of a Hong Kong school. Herman and Marlower (2005) suggested that servant-leadership shifts "a classroom mindset where adults stress obedience to authority to a community mindset where leaders stress helping others" (p.175). A learning community operating with servant-leadership principles could be characterized by "a vibrant and loving sense of togetherness and common purpose" (Van Brummelen, 2005, p.21).

*Learners' Needs in Classrooms*

The search for servant-leadership in classrooms begins with an understanding of what learners' needs are and how to meet these needs. The participants of this study are learners who are aged 11 to 18 studying in grades 7 to 12. The words *learners* and *students* are used interchangeably in this paper. The following sections describe learners' cognitive, social, individual and motivational needs.

*Cognitive needs.* To stimulate cognitive development, students are excited with meaningful learning tasks which are contextually relevant (McCombs & Miller, 2009). These practical lessons, in the forms of solving real world problems, provide opportunities for students to evaluate priorities in life. As a result, they learn to become creative problem solvers.

Christensen, Allworth, and Dillon (2012) argued that students need to "develop the skill to develop better skills, the knowledge to develop deeper knowledge, and the experience to learn from his/her experiences" (p.73). This implies that students need to be exposed to what to think and how to think, so that they develop capability to visualize and arrive at the own conclusion of what to do. In sum, students need to develop their critical and analytical thinking skills through cognitive challenges of relevant and meaningful learning tasks.

*Social needs.* McCombs and Miller (2007) argued that students are social beings who seek connections with their peers, their teachers, their school, and their community. Therefore, a learning atmosphere permeated with mutual respect is favorable for students to cultivate positive social skills (i.e., collaboration and cooperation).

Ridnouer (2006) defined such a learning community as a place where students mature in the social skills to support one another regardless of their social, economic, religious, and achievement differences. Furthermore, Kleiner (2008) argued that students develop their social acumen when they take turns being leaders and followers, thus learning to value responsibility and contribution, regardless of roles. In a

learning community, good followers are just as important as good leaders.

*Individual needs.* McCombs and Miller (2009) argued that every learner has a unique history, experience, culture, context, interests, strengths, and needs. Individual differences can be results of linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds. Hence, a teacher cannot assume to use the same stroke for all folks. Hendrick's (1987) commented that "how people learn determines how you teach" (p.129). This means that a teacher needs to know his/her students in order to employ effective strategies for guiding their development.

However, the researcher argues that there are common qualities learners need to acquire, regardless of their individual differences. Teachers leverage different methods to shape students' characters. The philosophy of servant-leadership emphasizes that the goal of a servant-leader is to develop the led to "become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants" (Greenleaf, 1970, p.13). The researcher implies that a servant-leader teacher works with different students but has the same goal, that they face obstacles in life with resilience, explore and develop their potentials, and live their lives to the fullest, with the mindset to benefit beyond themselves to their society.

*Motivational needs.* Motivation can be classified as being either extrinsic or intrinsic. Christensen et al. (2012) argued that the opposite of job dissatisfaction is not job satisfaction, but rather an absence of job dissatisfaction. Likewise, extrinsic motivators such as rewards and punishment in classrooms do

not lead students to develop a love for learning.

On the contrary, intrinsic motivators promote learning and the learners persevere through good and bad times. Intrinsic motivators can be manifested in forms as "challenging work, recognition, responsibility, and personal growth" (Christensen et al., 2012, p.21). They all lead to learners' engagement as well as a sense of accomplishment as defined by meaningful and exciting work. These arguments are supported by the American Psychological Association (1997) that intrinsic motivation is triggered if one can exercise personal choice and control, and the tasks are relevant to personal interests.

In sum, learners' needs can be categorized into cognitive, social, individual and motivational domains. The quest of this study is to investigate whether teachers, who are characterized as demonstrating these servant-leadership traits, meet these learners' needs.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study aims to explore learners' perceptions of servant-leadership as practiced by teachers in the context of classrooms, in the cultural setting of a Hong Kong school. It is a worthwhile study considering the following rationales.
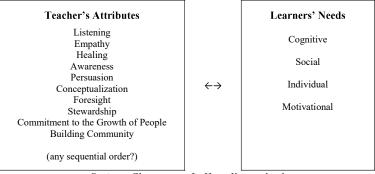
Firstly, empirical studies of servant-leadership have proven positive correlation between servant-leadership practices with school climate (Black, 2010), organizational commitment (Cerit, 2010), student achievement (Lambert, 2004), job satisfaction (McKenzie, 2012), and teaching effectiveness

(Metzcar, 2008). Parris and Peachey (2013) conducted cultural, cross-cultural and contextual analysis of 39 empirical studies from 27 different peer-reviewed journals between 2004 and 2011. A majority (44%) of these studies were conducted in educational settings. Hence, it is evidential that servant-leadership can be a beneficial practice in school settings. The researcher argues that further study can be useful in understanding its application at a classroom level.

Secondly, these mentioned studies along with many others as mentioned by Parris and Peachey (2013) were conducted with adults as participants. The researcher is curious about students' perceptions towards servant-leadership practices.

Lastly, the study of servant-leadership in America has gained momentum in recent years but the same cannot be said for Hong Kong. It is interesting to examine its cultural relevance in Hong Kong. Therefore, the following research questions are formulated:

1) What are learners' perceptions of servant-leadership as practiced by teachers in classrooms?
2) How does servant-leadership meet the needs of learners in classrooms?
3) How does the practice of servant-leadership build a learning community in the classroom?
4) How relevant is the concept of servant-leadership to classrooms in a Hong Kong school?

Figure 1 is the conceptual framework of this study, which graphically presents the variables of interest and their relationship to one another. The main actors in a classroom are

the teacher and learners. This research explores (a) the connection between teachers' servant-leadership attributes and learners' needs and (b) the sequential order of servant-leadership actions in building a learner-centered community.

| Teacher's Attributes | | Learners' Needs |
|---|---|---|
| Listening<br>Empathy<br>Healing<br>Awareness<br>Persuasion<br>Conceptualization<br>Foresight<br>Stewardship<br>Commitment to the Growth of People<br>Building Community<br><br>(any sequential order?) | ←→ | Cognitive<br><br>Social<br><br>Individual<br><br>Motivational |

*Setting – Classrooms of a Hong Kong school*

*Figure 1:* Graphic presentation of conceptual framework, illustrating servant-leadership characteristics and possible connection with learners' needs.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is grounded in a pragmatic paradigm, finding the most suitable explanations for the research questions (Powell, 2001). Hence, the researcher adopted a mixed-methods design with three phases, and they were conducted in a sequential manner. It was carried out in a Hong Kong school with context as described below.

*Sample*

The fieldwork was conducted in a K-12 school located in Hong Kong. It is a private (tuition-based) school which uses a

Canadian-based curriculum and has registration with the Education Bureau of Hong Kong. The school had a student population of 283 in the grades of 7 to 12, at the time of data collection of this study. They were all invited to participate in phase one of the three-phased research study.

*Research Design*

For phase one, all students of the studied Hong Kong school were invited to complete an online survey. The survey tool used was a modification of the Teacher Leadership Assessment (TLA), which was created by Metzcar (2008) for his empirical study of servant-leadership and effective teaching in classrooms. The TLA is a robust and reliable tool with Cronbach's alpha of 0.9602. Contextualization of the TLA was necessary, via a pilot study, to ensure its suitability for the students of the studied Hong Kong school, without culturally-laden words or phrases. The modified TLA was tested for internal reliability with Cronbach's alpha of 0.9752. Out of 283 survey respondents, the participation rate was 44%. The quantitative data were analyzed by general statistics expressed in modes and rank orders.

For phase two, only students who fully completed the survey were considered for stratified purposeful sampling. This sampling method was selected because of its advantage as described by Seale (2012) that

> A stratified sample is more accurate, and therefore more representative of the population than a simple random sample, but also more complex. Each member of the

population is divided into groups or strata and then a
simple random sample is selected for each stratum.
(p.140)

It is crucial to collect students' experiences of the studied
Hong Kong school, and not that of any other schools. Thus,
prospective participants were further screened with remaining
interviewees who had enrolled in the school for at least one
academic year. These finalized participants were invited for
focus-group interviews. These focus groups were grade-level
specific, with an intent that interviewees of the same group had
similar teachers and probably learning experiences, so that
purposeful discussion could be achieved. These were semi-
structured interviews and the questions were piloted before the
actual data collection. The interviews were audio recorded to
create verbatim for thematic analysis, following Miles and
Huberman's (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded
Sourcebook*. Prior to each focus-group interview, written
consents were sought from the interviewees and their
parents/guardians.

For phase three, a teacher, who was highly regarded by the
focus-group interviewees, was invited to provide a written
reflection of his philosophy of education and approaches for
teaching. The reflection was also analyzed thematically against
students' verbatim in phase two. Sources triangulation was
conducted which compared the teacher's reflection with the
students' stories. It addressed the research questions from
different perspectives.

RESULTS AND ANALYSES

*Descriptive Statistics – Phase One*

The contextualized survey, TLA, had 64 items, which were categorized into seven constructs of "Value Others", "Develop Others", "Build Community", "Display Authenticity", "Provide Leadership", "Share Leadership", and "Role Satisfaction". Each item was written with Likert-Type-Scale of "never", "rarely", "sometimes", "often", and "almost always". Modes reflected the most selected choices of survey respondents. Out of 64 items, there were 3 modes of "sometimes", 49 modes of "often", and 12 modes of "almost always". The practice of servant-leadership was often observed by the learners surveyed this study.

Survey items were categorized by constructs and the tallies were converted to percentages for ranking. As a result, "Provide Leadership" was the construct most observed by learners in classrooms. Further examination of the items with the highest counts of "often" and "almost always" provided practical examples of their meaning of "Provide Leadership". From the perceptions of these student respondents, their teachers provided leadership in classrooms so that everyone knew what took place in the class, and was clear on the key goals of the classroom. The teachers provided support and resources needed to help students meet learning goals.

"Role Satisfaction" and "Value Others" were the constructs least observed by the learners in the classrooms. Further examination of the items with the lowest counts of "often" and

"almost always" revealed that these student respondents did not often feel appreciated by those in the classes for what they contributed. They did not often receive encouragement and affirmation from others in their classes. The focus of these concerns was not on the teachers only but involved every member of their class.

The purpose of phase one in this study was to generate an overall understanding, in terms of presence or absence, of servant-leadership practices in classrooms. The survey result showed that students perceived that their teachers often demonstrated actions of servant-leadership in classrooms. The main emphasis was on the phases two and three of this study, which unfolded students' stories and compared them with a teacher's reflection.

*Thematic Analysis – Phases Two and Three*

Qualitative data in the form of transcripts collected through the focus-group interviews were analyzed thematically. It consisted of (a) affixing codes, (b) sorting the codes by patterns of commonality and differences, (c) identifying themes, and (d) generalizing key findings.

From particulars to general, eleven themes were identified from the codes. They were (a) conceptualization, (b) awareness, (c) foresight, (d) persuasion, (e) listening and empathy, (f) community building, (g) commitment to the growth of people, (h) healing, (i) stewardship, (j) mindset, and (k) relationship. Quotations were selected among these codes as evidence to support these themes. A reference to a quotation was indicated

with the altered name code, such as Jnp1. Lastly, these themes were generalized and categorized into five key findings.

*Finding 1: The cognitive needs of students can be met by teachers who are characterized by conceptualization, awareness, and foresight.*

*Conceptualization.* Students were interested to know the reasons for their class activities. They favored teachers who had structured work plans for the lessons and gave clear instructions. Two verbatim quotes are:

> Jnp1: He is more prepared. You will have a schedule. He will assign all the work for the whole month. He has more structure. . .
>
> Ktp3: I always like teachers to give clear instruction because you know what to do.

*Awareness.* Awareness of students' prior knowledge and interests helped teachers to adjust their lessons so that students found relevance in the new knowledge to their personal experiences. They were able to relate their learning tasks to their situations. Two verbatim quotes are:

> Ktp6: He describes the context in term of story so that we can relate much. Sometimes it relates to our personal life also so I remember more. . .
>
> Jsp5b: She has a lot of experiences and she knows how to approach different people and different topics with the right methods.

*Foresight.* Teachers with foresight were able to explain to students explicitly how they could move forward in their learning path. In cycles of show-and-tell, teachers showed their

students how to proceed and students told their teachers about their progress, and more importantly what hindered their process. It was a regular, on-going feedback loop. Teachers with foresight created opportunities for productive dialogues between the teachers and learners. Two verbatim quotes are:

> Mlp3a: He taught for the first 15 minutes. It was clear and understandable. Then you just work. I think you need to do it in order to understand it. . .

> Lyp1a: During class time he usually teaches for the first 20 minutes and we have 30 minutes of class work time. During the class work time we are able to do the questions and he is able to be there to help us.

*Finding 2: The social needs of students can be met by teachers who are characterized by persuasion, listening and empathy, and community building.*

*Persuasion.* Students respected their teachers who had clear and reasonable rules and guidelines for the classrooms. They valued opportunities to make decisions and freedom to explore and express their individuality. They also supported clear consequences for their actions. Persuasion was modeled when teachers disagreed with students' choices and actions but still expressed care for their students and made an effort to support them. Two verbatim quotes are:

> Atp5: I guess he isn't lenient but he isn't very strict either. He would talk to us about it until we reach agreement. He tells us what he doesn't like and within that boundary we can do whatever we want. . .

> Zep5b: She won't get mad at you when you don't pay

attention. When you ask her she would still answer you. She would tell you to pay attention next time.

*Listening and empathy.* Students expressed gratitude to their teachers who cared for their wellbeing, showed understanding of their struggles, and ultimately offered support. Two verbatim quotes are:

> Tmp3: I feel like she really wants us to do well and I actually feel that she cares what happened to our class and our grades. She is very understanding of what we are doing and how we feel. . .

> Lyp2a: She helps us a lot. She would actually listen and she understands the situation we are in. Yes, she is willing to help and I am happy about that.

*Community building.* The following quotes were taken from grader 12 respondents who have studied together as classmates for years. They shared responsibilities to care for classmates in their community.

> Dmp10a: We have these study groups and it actually boosts my grade a bit. Sometimes I stay afterschool. If I need help I can go to them and it is really helpful. . .

> Jnp10a: We have study group on Friday during lunch and we just talk about life lessons. We would go out to eat. We have bible study time. The relationship with the teacher and students is really close. Yeah!

*Finding 3: The individual needs of students can be met by teachers who are characterized by commitment to the growth of people, healing, and stewardship.*

*Commitment to the growth of people.* Teachers'

commitment to their students was described by students in terms of time and specific feedback for their improvement, in the areas of performance, formative and summative assessments. Two verbatim quotes are:

> Zep5c: She asks anyone who have questions to come afterschool to get extra help up to whatever time until you understand the concepts and all that. . .
> Jnp10b: She spends time to go over the draft with each one of us. It takes a lot of her time. She really likes to help. She encourages people to stay afterschool. She teaches you the details and slowly shows you.

*Healing.* An observant teacher was sensitive to a student' verbal and non-verbal cues. As such, the student trusted and respected his teacher, willing to seek advice and ready to accept counsel from the teacher. For example:

> Ptp5: He walks around the class and look at what people are doing, see if anyone needs help. Whenever I have trouble doing something or trouble in social life, he would notice it like I am not happy. I can relate to him and I go to him.

*Stewardship.* A teacher named Mr. X was commended by all the interviewees who had had him as their teacher. He took upon himself the responsibility of supporting all students who came to seek his help. He did not allow students to slack off but held them accountable for their learning tasks. He was available to his students whenever they needed him, including weekends. These stories from students were examples of Mr. X as a steward. His support for students came in various forms.

Two verbatim quotes are:

> Slp3: He is willing to help even during his spare time. During weekend, I sent him three emails with many questions. He takes his time to answer them and actually quickly. . .
>
> Dmp10b: He doesn't help me in one subject alone. He helps me in different subjects and life like making good decisions.

The first, second and third key findings qualified students' perceptions of servant-leadership as practiced by teachers in classrooms. Students' cognitive, social and individual needs can be met by teachers who exhibit these 10 characteristics of servant-leadership. Furthermore, the researcher found two other interesting key findings concerning student motivation and teacher-student relationship as described below.

*Finding 4: The motivational needs of students can be met by teachers who encourage students to develop a growth mindset, believing in the impact of effort and attitude.*

*Mindset.* During the interviews, students were asked how they handled difficult subjects at school. Two distinct mindsets were observed. Students with optimism were confident that they could turn their setbacks into success. The virtues of perseverance and resilience were determining factors for their current and future results. Two verbatim quotes are:

> Gyp2b: I just keep asking him. I am in the same question and he is two questions ahead. I just ask him to go back and answer my question. . . .
>
> Jsp4: I attend classes for the purpose of bettering my

education. I guess that doesn't take the enjoyment out of it but I think I have a goal that I want to achieve rather than having fun. I do what I need to do. It is not about enjoying.

On the other hand, students, who were less hopeful or perhaps little hopeless, perceived that their performance was a result of their innate abilities. They convinced themselves that there was very little they could do to affect the outcomes of their school experiences. Their comments fitted with the lowest ranked survey items under the construct of "Role Satisfaction", as mentioned in the phase one survey result. Two verbatim quotes are:

Nip3: If you give it all and you still get a bad mark for your subject, it is very discouraging. For this subject, I just cannot do it . . .

Atp1: A lot of times our best work is not even adequate for passing marks which may be a bit stressful. Doing hard work and doing possible work are two different things. We are kind of in the impossible range sometimes.

The differences of mindsets lead to positive responses or negative reactions to challenges in learning. The researcher infers that encouraging and supporting students to develop a growth mindset could result in intrinsic motivation for learning. As a result, students' perceptions of "Role Satisfaction" could also be improved.

*Finding 5: Building teacher-student relationship could be the primary and most effective way to serve students.*

*Relationship.* It was noteworthy that 9 out of 12 grade 7 to 9 students (75%) and 8 out of 12 grade 10 to 12 students (67%) described their teachers as meeting their social relational need prior to cognitive, motivational, or individual need. Two verbatim quotes are:

> Jnp5: I think that my favorite is Mrs. T. Mrs. T is really down to earth and she is really honest with us. She tries to help each of us. She spends time to go over the personal essay with each one of us. . . She spends a lot of time overlooking a lot of essay.
>
> Msp1e: I really like Mr. X because he is really caring. I asked him for resource and he said sure I will send you my resources. You can come and ask me or afterschool we can have a class. This is what he said and I think that he is very caring and helpful.

The fourth and fifth key findings suggested two developmental aspects of learners that greatly affected their learning. Firstly, students' mindset affected their motivation toward learning. Thus, it was important for teachers to cultivate a growth mindset and communicate hope to students, especially when they faced hardship. Secondly, adolescents are emotional and relational beings. Many of them filtered their learning tasks and evaluated their learning experiences through their relational reserves with their teachers. Hence, teachers needed to know their students as people in order to be effective in impacting their education. These findings were supported by evidence from interviewees who spoke highly of an identified teacher, Mr. X.

Subsequently, Mr. X was approached to provide a written reflection of his philosophy of education and approaches to teaching and learning. Phase two of this study was a collection of students' stories through semi-structured focus-group interviews. Phase three of this study was a collection of a teacher's reflection. Sources triangulation was conducted to compare and validate the consistency of their realities from the perspectives of students and a teacher.

Mr. X's reflection was analyzed thematically and six themes were identified. They were: (a) self-awareness, (b) conceptualization, (c) foresight, (d) persuasion, (e) commitment to the growth of people, and (f) stewardship. These were six of the ten servant-leadership traits as identified by Spears (2010). Quotations are listed below as examples:

*Self-awareness, sharing of philosophy of education.*

- "Deep in my heart, I know I have a passion for teaching. A teenager spends most of his time in school and I can see school is a strategic place to reach out to youth."
- "In school, I can reach out to students through academics. I can walk alongside with them with their studies."

*Conceptualization, meeting the cognitive need of students.*

- "It is natural to me to break down outcomes and concepts into smaller correlated chunks and to identify practical steps in helping students to attain the knowledge."

- "I categorize and summarize, give big pictures and detailed steps as well."
- "It is my strength to explain the complex concepts using different approaches that students can understand."

*Foresight, meeting the cognitive need of students.*

- "I model how to think and how to reason to solve problem."
- "I usually see the underlying question and am able to help the student with more than what he has asked for."

*Persuasion, meeting the social needs of students.*

- "I encourage students to set personal goals and emphasized the importance to actively think about their own learning."

*Commitment to the growth of people, meeting the individual needs of students.*

- "Equips them for the challenge and demand of the world but more importantly, to prepare them to be faithful steward to serve God and mankind."
- "I strive to provide a diverse environment so that every student can experience learning according to the different needs and ability and learning style."

*Stewardship, meeting the individual needs of students.*

- "I will find ways to help students to learn, and if one way does not work, I will find another way."
- "I respected their uniqueness because they are all bearer of God's image."
- "Students should be treated fairly but not equally

because every student is different."

Table 1 provides matches of students' experiences with Mr. X's reflection. This sources triangulation supported the conceptual framework of this study, that there were connections between teachers' servant-leadership traits and learners' needs in classrooms. In particular, teachers' practices of servant-leadership met learners' cognitive, social and individual needs.

| Table 1: Possible Connections Between a Servant-leader's Character Traits and Learners' Needs | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Characteristics of a Servant-Leader** | **Excerpts from Mr.X** | **Excerpts from Students** | **Learners' Needs** |
| **Conceptualization** | • It is natural to me to break down outcomes and concepts into smaller correlated chunks and identify practical steps in helping students to attain the knowledge.<br>• My classes are structured, well planned and clear.<br>• Explain the complex concepts using different approaches that students can understand. | • I always like teachers to give clear instruction because you know what to do (Ktp3)<br><br>• He is more a neat and tidy person who writes things out. . . . I prefer to learn things in a neat way. (Gyp2a) | Cognitive needs |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Awareness** | | | |
| **Foresight** | • I model how to think and how to reason to solve problem. | • He gives you samples and he tells you what to write. We don't need to guess all the times. He actually explains the problems (Nip9) | |
| **Persuasion** | • I encourage students to set personal goals and emphasized the importance to actively think about their own learning. | • He encourages those who don't participate to participate more and he give out prizes (Zep2) | Social needs |
| **Listening** | | | |
| **Empathy** | | | |
| **Community Building** | | | |
| **Commitment to the Growth of People** | • I strive to provide a diverse environment so that every student can experience learning according to the different needs and ability and learning style. | • We get our tests back and he would talk to us individually (Nip5) | Individual needs |
| **Healing** | | | |

| Stewardship | • I will find ways to help students to learn, and if one way does not work, I will find another way.<br>• I want to teach them self-discipline so that they can achieve their own goals in life, not just in study. | • He doesn't help me in one subject alone. He helps me in different subjects and life like making good decisions (Dmp10b) |
| --- | --- | --- |

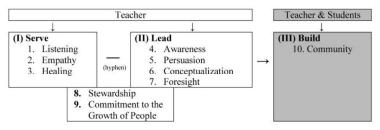*Meta-Analysis of Phases One, Two and Three*

Meta-analysis of evidence from the three phases supports a model of a learner-centered community operating with servant-leadership principles. In this model, the 10 characteristics of servant-leadership are presented in a sequential order, which can also be summed with three key actions of service, leadership, and community building.

*Service.* The fifth key finding of this empirical study states that building positive teacher-student relationship could be the primary and most effective way to serve students. From the interpretation of students' stories which were organized into themes, a teacher began to serve his/her students by listening attentively to understand the other persons' worldviews, opinions, experiences, and interests. This allowed the teacher to know the students so that the teacher could genuinely show empathy and effectively bring healing into the lives of the students. Through serving, the teacher and students established respectful and caring relationships. The

teacher might then lead the students with relational authority and referent power.

*Leadership.* Mr. X's reflection showed that the combination of awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, and foresight led him to (a) set priorities among all demands; (b) influence students with insights and with patience; (c) evaluate the overall needs of the learning process; and (d) mentor the students' growth and development with positive reinforcement and critical feedback. He used different ways to lead the students and meet their needs.

Sources triangulation of learners' transcripts and teacher's reflection revealed that Mr. X did not direct the students according to his own agenda but the best interests of the students. He exhibited both serving and leading his students in different contexts. The researcher argues that Mr. X has displayed stewardship and commitment to the growth of people which can be symbolized by the hyphenation linking the words *servant* and *leader* as *servant-leader*.

*Community Building.* Finally, the survey result confirms that the practices of servant-leadership were often observed by the students of the studied school. However, "Role Satisfaction" and "Value Others" were the constructs least observed. The researcher's suggestion is that through service to one another, students contribute positively to their classroom community. These experiences could result in improved perceptions of "Role Satisfaction." When students emulate their servant-leader teachers and act as givers in their social interactions with others, they feel valued and desire to value others. As a result,

a classroom becomes a training ground for students to develop as servant-leaders, who work together in building a service-oriented community. The researcher argues that the philosophy and practices of servant-leadership are applicable to classroom community building. Figure 2 presents a model with progressive stages of a teacher (a) serving and (b) leading his/her students towards (c) building a community together. It aims to create a learner-centered classroom governed by servant-leadership attributes.



| Teacher | | Teacher & Students |
|---|---|---|
| **(I) Serve** 1. Listening 2. Empathy 3. Healing | **(II) Lead** 4. Awareness 5. Persuasion 6. Conceptualization 7. Foresight | **(III) Build** 10. Community |
| | — (hyphen) | |
| | 8. Stewardship 9. Commitment to the Growth of People | |

*Figure 2:* Progressive model of a learner-centered classroom, operating with servant-leadership principles.

EVALUATION OF THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

This research study explores learners' perceptions of servant-leadership in classrooms. The researcher uses empirical evidence to address the four research questions below.

Firstly, survey result shows that the practice of servant-leadership in classrooms was often observed by learners of the studied Hong Kong school. "Provide Leadership" was the construct most observed by learners and "Role Satisfaction"

and "Value Others" were the constructs least observed by learners. The researcher suggests that building a learning community operating with servant-leadership principles can improve learners' perceptions of "Role Satisfaction" and "Value Others".

Secondly, key findings one, two and three give evidence that the practices of servant-leadership by teachers meet learners' cognitive, social, and individual needs. Selected quotations from interviewees are examples of students' experiences and teachers' behaviors. Although the researcher is unable to find correlation between servant-leadership traits and learners' motivational needs, her presumption is that learners may likely develop intrinsic motivation, when they are appropriately challenged with tasks in a caring environment, where they have freedom to make responsible choices and express their individuality. In other words, learners' motivational needs may be met indirectly when their cognitive, social and individual needs are satisfied.

Thirdly, a model of classroom learning community is proposed with the 10 characteristics of servant-leaders staged in a sequential order. It is featured with three key actions of service, leadership, and community building. Service leads to an establishment of legitimacy for leadership. One of the goals of servant-leadership is to develop the next generation of servant-leaders. Servant-leadership is a blend of imminence with transcendence and it results in building wholeness for both the leader and the led, teacher and students.

Fourthly, it is evidential that Mr. X has practiced servant-

leadership in his classroom. The philosophy of servant-leadership is based on one's desire to serve (Greenleaf, 1970). Hence, teachers and students can choose to be and become servant-leaders in their classrooms. The practice of servant-leadership is relevant and feasible for classrooms of this Hong Kong school.

Overall, the belief and practice of servant-leadership is not about heroic leaders but followers and their needs. Greenleaf (1970) argued that it is paradoxical and thought-provoking to consider a servant as a leader and that service can result in leadership. This research contextualizes Greenleaf's belief of servant-leadership within the context of classrooms and the culture of a Hong Kong school. The researcher concludes that the practices of servant-leadership by teachers meet the learners' needs, and it is desirable to build a classroom community operating with servant-leadership principles.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This research uses a mixed-methods approach to study the practices of servant-leadership in classrooms of a Hong Kong school. Empirical study of servant-leadership with students as main participants, in the context of classrooms, and in the cultural background of a Hong Kong school is unique. The model of learner-centered community operating with servant-leadership principles adds new understanding of the 10 characteristics of servant-leaders as described by Spears (2010).

The researcher argues that servant-leadership is favorable

and relevant to classrooms of this studied Hong Kong school. However, this study is conducted in one school in Hong Kong. Therefore, findings cannot be generalized as being representative of all schools in Hong Kong. Further studies of servant-leadership application in various types of schools in Hong Kong would provide further insights in this area of scholarship.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A comparative study to explore similarity and difference of servant-leadership practices in classrooms between different types of schools in Hong Kong is worthwhile. This can be conducted between international and local schools, government-funded and private schools, or schools with different religious affiliations. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, this comparative study can yield greater understanding of servant-leadership practices in classrooms in Hong Kong.

Another research suggestion is to involve both teachers and students as participants of a servant-leadership classroom study. Metzcar (2008) conducted his study with teachers as the survey respondents. This study was conducted with students as the survey respondents. Metzcar's Teacher Leadership Assessment (TLA) can be administered to both teachers and students. Their differences in perception of the seven constructs can lead to fruitful discussion for improvement. This can be followed up with an action research study.

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