

Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC) Volume 15 No. 1 April 2026

pp.110-129 ersc@mandela.ac.za

ISSN: 2221-4070

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2026/v15n1a7>

Female Principals' Servant Leadership Experiences and Quality Education in Low Socioeconomic Contexts in South Africa: Through a Feminist Theory Lens¹

Melese Shula

ORCID No: 0000-0002-8037-4322

North-west University

melese.shula@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

This paper reports on the servant leadership practices of female school principals and how these practices improved the quality of education in rural schools in South Africa. Using a feminist theoretical lens, the researcher explored how female principals conceptualised and enacted servant leadership in under-resourced school contexts, and how this leadership approach promoted educational quality despite systemic and gendered constraints. The research was exploratory and interpretative in nature, drawing on qualitative interviews with six female principals and six female teachers across three provinces in South Africa. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The findings revealed several key themes: servant leadership as a moral and spiritual calling; relationships as the foundation of leadership; collective leadership and shared vision; holistic development of learners; motivation through empathy and staff development; and balancing accountability with a servant ethos. The study suggests that servant leadership, grounded in feminist praxis, offers a viable framework for educational transformation from the perspective of female principals. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on gendered leadership and carry important implications for educational policy and school governance reform.

Key words: female leadership, servant leadership, feminist theory, quality education, low socioeconomic schools

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¹ Ethical clearance number: NWU - 00273-22-A2

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Introduction

South Africa's democratic dispensation places strong emphasis on the importance of inclusive and equitable education. The South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996b), together with the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996a), lay the foundation for participatory and democratic governance in schools, highlighting the critical role of school leadership in driving educational change. Within this framework, school leaders are expected to ensure that all learners, including those in rural areas, have access to quality and equitable education. This requires principals to not only implement national education policies but also to lead their schools in ways that promote social justice and expand educational opportunities for historically disadvantaged communities.

School leadership goes beyond just managing instruction; it also involves creating supportive environments that improve educational quality, build strong relationships with communities, and enhance teacher retention (Naidoo & Perumal, 2014). The leadership styles adopted by principals, and how these styles are perceived by teachers and learners, significantly influence the school climate and educational outcomes. Research shows that participatory leadership practices promote collaboration among teachers, enhance morale, and improve teaching and learning (Bush, 2007; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). As a result, effective leadership plays a vital role in fostering positive organisational cultures that support learner achievement and lead to sustainable improvements in schools.

Within this broader discourse on educational leadership, there has been a growing focus on the leadership styles of women in schools. Research indicates that female principals often embrace relational, collaborative, and care-focused leadership methods that resonate with the ideals of servant leadership. For instance, Schmidt and Mestry (2015) discovered that female principals tend to foster strong connections with their school communities through supportive and empathetic leadership. Likewise, Zitha (2022) illustrated how female school leaders address structural and cultural challenges while using collaborative techniques to steer their schools. Additionally, Williams and Perumal (2021) highlighted how female principals blend care, advocacy, and resistance to foster transformative educational settings.

However, the landscape of school leadership in rural South Africa is rather complex. Schools in these contexts often function under difficult circumstances marked by scarce resources, high teacher turnover, and systemic inequalities that compromise educational quality. For female principals, these challenges are compounded by institutional gender discrimination, entrenched patriarchal norms, and administrative pressures that can limit their professional influence and leadership effectiveness (Pagayon et al., 2025). These difficulties are further exacerbated by the wider socioeconomic factors that influence education in rural communities. Research further reveals that patriarchal norms still impact how leadership authority is perceived, often leading to female principals being viewed as less legitimate than their male peers (Ndebele, 2018). Recent studies emphasise that female leaders must contend with various forms of marginalisation related to gender, organisational culture, and societal expectations while managing demanding leadership roles (Pietersen et al., 2025).

Even though the number of women in school leadership roles has risen, existing literature frequently either highlights the challenges women encounter or examines the leadership styles they adopt, treating these elements as separate issues. As a result, the relationship between gendered leadership practices and structural inequalities in rural education remains underexplored. Recent research has shown that female principals exhibit resilience and adaptive leadership strategies as they respond to gendered expectations and systemic limitations in rural schools (Nhlumayo, 2025). However, there has been limited empirical focus on how these practices impact school development, teacher commitment, and educational outcomes.

Another limitation in the existing literature is the lack of theoretical exploration regarding leadership styles that focus on service, relationships, and ethical responsibility in education. Servant leadership emphasises the importance of leaders who are dedicated to supporting others, encouraging collaboration, and prioritising the well-being and growth of both teachers and students. Research suggests that implementing servant leadership practices can enhance teacher morale, increase professional commitment, and improve school effectiveness by fostering supportive organisational environments (Makirimani & Naicker, 2025). Additionally, studies in rural South African schools indicate that strategies like community involvement, building a shared vision, and providing teacher support play a significant role in promoting educational resilience and improving quality in resource-limited settings (Shula & Heystek, 2025).

However, despite these findings, the relationship between female leadership, servant leadership practices, and the quest for quality education in rural schools is still not well understood. Much of the research has concentrated on issues of identity, representation, or gender-related challenges, with insufficient focus on how the leadership practices of female principals can lead to improvements in school climate, teacher motivation, and the overall teaching and learning experience. To address this gap, the current study utilises feminist theory to explore how female principals implement servant leadership in rural South African schools and how these practices can enhance the quality of education in low socioeconomic environments.

Background

Gender inequalities in leadership continue to impact opportunities for women in various professional fields, including education. Rincón et al. (2017) examined various barriers that prevent women from moving into leadership roles. These barriers, which are often structural and cultural, stop women from reaching senior positions even when they have the right qualifications and experience. In educational leadership, these challenges are particularly evident in school management systems, where women often find it difficult to secure principalships and other high-level roles. Babic and Hansez (2021) highlighted that the glass ceiling is a significant factor contributing to gender inequality because it limits women's advancement into leadership roles.

Invisible barriers can restrict recognition and career advancement, leading female leaders to experience lower confidence, self-esteem, and feelings of dissatisfaction when their contributions go unrecognised (Khumalo, 2021). This challenge is especially pronounced in teaching, a field predominantly occupied by women, yet the leadership roles remain largely male-dominated with limited research on women's leadership styles (Pillay, 2025). In South Africa, female school leaders confront both structural and cultural challenges including gendered expectations of authority. Many feel compelled to adopt traditionally masculine traits in order to be accepted, which can hinder their ability to express authentic leadership; their contributions are also often undervalued compared to their male counterparts (Nehemia & Lenkoe, 2023).

Historical and societal norms reinforce the notion that leadership is largely a male domain. Lumby and Azaola (2014) pointed out that gender stereotypes continue to influence perceptions of leadership suitability, often leading to the assumption that men are inherently better suited for these roles. Women who aspire to leadership positions face increased scrutiny, and their actions are frequently judged through a gendered lens (Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Against this bedrock, this study investigates the servant leadership practices of female principals in rural South African schools operating in low socioeconomic conditions. By focusing on their personal experiences, leadership strategies, and methods, the research examines how these principals overcome structural and gender-related challenges to improve educational quality. Using feminist theory as a framework, the study emphasises how relational and service-oriented leadership practices contribute to teaching, learning, and school development—even in the face of limited resources and gender biases.

Literature Review

Educational management and leadership involve the strategies and practices that steer schools toward achieving academic excellence, effective administration, and fostering a positive organisational culture (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Good leadership in education goes beyond just managing resources and ensuring compliance with policies; it's about creating environments where teachers, students, and communities can thrive (Bush, 2007). Key elements of this approach include setting a clear vision, making ethical decisions, and promoting collaboration, recognising that schools are complex social systems influenced by cultural, structural, and societal factors (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2020).

In rural South Africa, where schools often struggle with limited resources, socioeconomic challenges, and systemic inequalities, the role of educational leaders becomes even more crucial (Memela & Ramathan, 2022). Principals serve not just as administrators but also as moral and social leaders who can significantly impact teacher motivation, student success, and community involvement (Bush, 2011). Leadership styles that emphasise building relationships, empowering others, and encouraging participatory governance are vital because they tackle both educational quality and social inequalities (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010).

Within this context, servant leadership stands out as a particularly relevant and supportive model. It aligns well with the main goals of educational management and leadership by focusing on relational, ethical, and inclusive practices that benefit teachers, students, and communities. This approach translates core leadership values—like collaboration, care, and moral responsibility—into actionable steps that can transform school culture, improve learning outcomes, and advance social justice.

The main aim of this study is to investigate how female school principals in rural South African schools practise servant leadership, viewed through a feminist lens, and to assess the effects of these practices on the quality of education. By merging servant leadership theory with feminist insights, this research looks at how female principals operate in settings marked by scarce resources, systemic inequalities, and gender-related obstacles. It goes beyond the usual goals of enhancing performance or motivating teachers, proposing rather, that these leadership approaches can foster social change by altering power dynamics, redistributing authority, and reclaiming relational and ethical leadership styles that are often neglected in hierarchical structures.

Greenleaf (1977) first presented servant leadership as a model where the intention to serve comes before the desire to lead, highlighting that leaders should prioritise the needs of others. In the context of schools, this means concentrating on the well-being, development, and interests of teachers, students, and the community. Actions like empowerment, mentorship, active listening, and collaborative decision-making are not just administrative tactics; they serve as tools to transform institutional power. By nurturing relational authority and moral accountability, female principals can bring about change at both the micro (classroom and staff interactions) and meso (school-wide systems) levels, reshaping community dynamics, and challenging established hierarchies (Bhengu & Emanuel, 2022; Schmidt, & Mestry, (2015).

In rural South African schools, where issues like structural inequality, limited resources, and gender expectations converge, servant leadership emerges as a relevant and effective practice. It boosts teacher motivation, creates a positive school environment, and enhances student performance (Shula, 2023). More than just these immediate advantages, servant leadership reshapes the social dynamics within schools by fostering trust, solidarity, and a sense of collective agency. The power dynamic shifts from a traditional top-down model to a more relational, collaborative, and ethically sound approach, achieved through shared decision-making, community engagement, moral advocacy, and empowering teachers, which in turn builds resilience and adaptability in resource-challenged settings (Kainde & Mandagi, 2023).

Recent studies show that female principals frequently exemplify servant leadership as both a moral and political approach, especially in under-resourced and patriarchal contexts. These leaders prioritise care,

inclusion, and accountability over mere management techniques, often overcoming cultural and structural obstacles to reach shared objectives (Albeshir, 2024; Jang & Alexander, 2022). This method redefines social power by positioning principals as ethical leaders who can confront oppressive norms while meeting the needs of students and their communities. In schools with scarce resources, a relational and empathetic leadership style enables principals to address social and emotional needs without sacrificing educational quality (Bush, 2011).

Servant leadership plays a crucial role in fostering intersectional resistance. For instance, Jang and Alexander (2022) pointed out that Black female principals in the United States employ relational leadership to address issues of racism and sexism, advocating for the needs of marginalised students. In a similar vein, female principals in South Africa utilise servant leadership to navigate patriarchal and hierarchical structures, thereby promoting inclusive and participatory governance. By focusing on improvisation, collaboration, and collective decision-making, these leaders strengthen institutional resilience, highlighting how servant leadership can serve as a grassroots mechanism for social change in inequitable educational environments (Bahrami, 2025).

Feminist leadership theory further illuminates how gender and context influence leadership experiences. By incorporating a feminist ethic of care into school practices, female principals can redistribute power, challenge existing norms, and foster equity, solidarity, and moral accountability. These changes manifest on various levels: interpersonal (relationships between teachers and principals), organisational (the overall school climate and decision-making processes), and community (interactions between schools and their communities). Thus, social change encompasses ethical, relational, and culturally responsive aspects (Bhengu & Emanuel, 2022; Dyantyi, 2025). Through this approach, servant leadership emerges as a potent force for both educational and social transformation.

While servant leadership has great potential to drive change, it also comes with its own set of limitations. Its emphasis on care, relational authority, and ethical responsibility might unintentionally reinforce traditional gender roles that suggest women should be nurturing and selfless, which can perpetuate patriarchal norms (Bush, 2020). Moreover, relying on moral authority instead of formal institutional power may limit the scope for broader structural reforms, leaving systemic inequities unaddressed. Therefore, servant leadership by itself cannot dismantle deep-rooted hierarchies or fully redistribute institutional power; achieving systemic change necessitates a blend of relational leadership and institutional reform.

In summary, the example of servant leadership in rural South African schools shows how female principals utilise relational, ethical, and participatory practices to promote transformative social change. By redefining power dynamics, redistributing authority, and adopting a feminist ethic of care, these leaders enhance educational quality while advocating for equity and social justice. However, to achieve meaningful systemic change, it is essential to combine servant leadership with broader structural strategies, providing a more nuanced understanding of how leadership can serve as both a tool for care and a means for social transformation in complex educational environments.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Theory Perspective

This study employs feminist theory to critically examine how female principals in rural South African schools practise servant leadership and what that means for the quality of education. Unlike simple descriptions of gendered leadership, a feminist perspective digs deeper into issues of power, authority, and structural inequality within educational systems. Feminist theory suggests that schools are social institutions, which exist within larger patriarchal frameworks where cultural norms, historical practices, and institutional hierarchies tend to favour men. In these environments, leadership authority is often justified by positional power, which emphasises traits typically associated with masculinity—like assertiveness, hierarchy, and competition—while downplaying the relational and care-oriented leadership styles often linked to women (Hartmann, 2003; Khoza, 2024).

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Within this context, servant leadership presents a relational and ethical alternative. Greenleaf (1977) described servant leadership as a philosophy where the leader's main aim is to serve others, focusing on their growth, well-being, and most pressing needs. Viewed through a feminist lens, servant leadership transcends mere ethical or managerial practices to become a form of resistance against patriarchal educational systems. It questions the conventional power dynamics by shifting authority from positional dominance to relational and moral authority, thus redistributing influence among teachers, students, and the wider school community. This change is both structural and cultural because it alters school norms, decision-making processes, and even the definition of what true leadership looks like.

The implications of this synthesis for social change are profound. Servant leadership, shaped by feminist critique, operates on various levels. On a personal level, female principals employ empathy, active listening, and mentorship to empower teachers and amplify student voices, directly challenging traditional hierarchies that view leaders as the only decision-makers. At the organisational level, servant leadership promotes participatory governance and shared responsibility, allowing schools to operate in a more democratic and inclusive manner (Bahrami, 2025; Lomotey, 2019). In the community context, principals involve parents and local stakeholders, reclaiming education as a shared resource instead of a top-down system. These approaches collectively transform the concept of power: authority shifts from being singular and positional to being distributed, ethical, and relational, leading to significant social change in education.

Additionally, this framework redefines quality education not merely as a collection of performance metrics but as an issue of social justice. Schools guided by feminist-informed servant leadership emphasis equity, inclusion, and the empowerment of learners, addressing the structural inequalities that have historically marginalised certain groups. By centring care, collaboration, and accountability in their leadership, female principals work to break down barriers to opportunity and create educational environments where every learner can thrive. In this way, the quality of education is intertwined with the justice and fairness of school systems, rather than being narrowly measured by test scores or efficiency metrics (Eva et al., 2019; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

The feminist perspective sheds light on the transformative aspects of servant leadership. Female principals view care and relationships as not just nurturing but also as strategic and political actions. By fostering teacher development, creating inclusive environments, and advocating for marginalised students, they engage in a form of resistance against institutional norms. Through their relational authority, these leaders confront both overt and subtle patriarchal structures, adjusting school hierarchies while ensuring stability. This form of resistance is adaptive, arising from real-world challenges like limited resources, socioeconomic disparities, and systemic gender biases that compel leaders to demonstrate ethical judgment and improvisational skills (Albeshir, 2024; Jang & Alexander, 2022).

However, while feminist-informed servant leadership is a significant avenue for social change, it has its drawbacks. Emphasising care and relational authority can unintentionally reinforce gendered expectations that women should always be nurturing and selfless, which can perpetuate certain patriarchal norms. Moreover, by prioritising ethical influence over structural challenges, servant leadership might enhance local school conditions without addressing broader institutional inequalities, such as biases in national education policies or the systemic underfunding of rural schools (Nhlumayo & Ngubane, 2025). Therefore, while servant leadership embodies both care and resistance, it is not enough on its own to dismantle deep-rooted patriarchy; it needs to be paired with structural reforms, advocacy, and policy changes.

In conclusion, combining feminist theory with servant leadership offers a solid framework for understanding how female principals drive social change in rural schools. It views leadership as a relational, moral, and resistance-focused practice, emphasising the roles of care, empathy, and shared authority in transforming school cultures, redistributing power, and promoting educational equity. By framing quality education as a social justice issue rather than just a performance metric, this approach

positions female principals not just as school administrators but as key players in systemic change, tackling structural inequalities, reclaiming relational authority, and creating inclusive, equitable learning environments.

Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study approach within a constructivist framework to investigate the servant leadership practices of female principals in high-performing rural schools located in low-income communities of South Africa. Constructivism suggests that knowledge is created collaboratively between the researcher and participants, with meaning being shaped by social, cultural, and contextual factors (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This method was particularly effective for understanding how female school leaders interpret and implement servant leadership in environments marked by limited resources, patriarchal norms, and systemic inequalities, while also emphasising the importance of education quality as a matter of social justice rather than just performance metrics. The multiple case study design allowed for a comparative analysis across six different rural schools, highlighting both common patterns and unique contextual details in leadership practices (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018).

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who had demonstrated effective leadership in challenging rural contexts. The criteria for inclusion required principals to: (a) lead rural schools serving low socioeconomic communities, (b) show evidence of school success through district rankings and consistent student performance on standardised tests, and (c) have a history of practising relational, people-centred leadership. Schools led by principals with less than three years of experience, those without clear evidence of school improvement, or those located in urban or semi-urban areas were excluded to keep the focus on leaders facing structural disadvantages. In each school, two participants were chosen: the principal and one teacher, resulting in a total of 12 participants. Including teachers allowed for a more comprehensive view by comparing the principals' self-reported practices with staff perceptions, thereby enhancing credibility, and providing a relational perspective on leadership (Stake, 1995).

In this study, performance is defined through a combination of quantitative and contextual indicators, including district rankings, standardised test scores over three years, and the schools' ability to sustain academic success despite limited resources. This approach recognises that performance is influenced by social factors, reflecting both student outcomes and the leaders' skills in overcoming structural challenges to learning. The research was conducted with an awareness of the researcher's background as an education professional familiar with rural schools. The researcher understood that his previous experiences with these schools and their leaders might introduce bias. To address this, he kept reflective field journals, engaged in member checking by sharing his initial interpretations with participants for their feedback, and used triangulation by incorporating perspectives from both principals and teachers. Feminist theory played a crucial role in guiding the analysis, ensuring that issues of power dynamics, gendered experiences, and systemic inequalities were central to understanding the findings, rather than simply attributing results to individual effort or technical leadership abilities (Alomair, 2015; Dyantyi, 2025).

The data collection process included semi-structured, in-person interviews that lasted about an hour each and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Observational notes were also taken to capture the school culture, interactions among participants, and the nuances of the context. By involving both principals and teachers, the study gained a deeper insight into the relational dynamics within the school and highlighted how servant leadership was both enacted and perceived.

For data analysis, the researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-step thematic analysis method: getting familiar with the data, generating initial codes, identifying patterns, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and crafting the final narrative. Feminist theory guided the coding and theme development, focusing on the experiences of marginalisation, relational power, and resistance to patriarchal norms. The codes were refined iteratively to capture both individual and collective practices of empowerment, relational authority, and community accountability. Any contradictions in the participants' narratives, like differing views on principal authority or teacher autonomy, were addressed through reflective discussions and comparisons across cases, ensuring that the analysis was sensitive to power imbalances and structural limitations.

From this analysis, six main themes emerged: (1) leadership as a moral and political calling; (2) relational and empathetic practices as forms of authority; (3) collective leadership and a shared vision; (4) holistic learner development as a measure of social justice; (5) staff motivation and professional development driven by care; and (6) navigating accountability within a servant leadership framework. These themes illustrate the connection between personal ethics, systemic challenges, and feminist-informed leadership strategies, showing how female principals in rural schools drive social change by reshaping institutional power, reclaiming relational authority, and creating equitable learning environments. This multiple case study, grounded in feminist theory, offers a thoughtful and critically aware perspective on how female rural principals use servant leadership not just as a style, but as a strategic and transformative approach to tackle gender inequalities and promote educational social justice.

To ensure trustworthiness in this study, the researcher employed several strategies that align with qualitative rigor and feminist principles. The researcher enhanced credibility by triangulating data from both principals and teachers, and we conducted member checking to confirm our interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher maintained reflexivity through reflective journals that documented our positionality and biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By providing a detailed description of the context, the researcher improved transferability, and kept an audit trail of transcripts, coding, and thematic development to ensure dependability. Peer debriefing and iterative analysis helped support confirmability, making sure that the findings truly reflected the experiences of participants rather than the researcher's own assumptions, ethically representing the voices of marginalised groups in rural schooling contexts (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995).

The North-West University Ethics Committee approved this study's ethical guidelines. Participants were provided with comprehensive information about the research's purpose, scope, and potential impacts, and they gave their written informed consent before any data was collected. To protect their privacy, pseudonyms were used for both participants and schools (P for principals, T for teachers), and all identifiable information was removed from transcripts and reports. The data were securely stored, with access limited to the researcher (British Educational Research Association, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following a feminist epistemological approach, the interview questions were designed to delve into issues of power, gender, and relationships in leadership. The coding and theme development aimed to amplify the voices of participants, emphasise their gendered experiences, and view leadership practices as opportunities for resistance and change. This method highlighted the relational and transformative aspects of servant leadership in under-resourced rural schools, ensuring that the findings accurately represented the lived experiences of participants within their challenging environments.

Findings

This section discusses the findings that emerged from the data. From the analysis, the following themes emerged: leadership as a moral and spiritual calling; relationships as the bedrock of leadership; collective leadership and a shared vision; holistic development of learners; motivation through empathy and staff development; and the challenge of balancing accountability with a servant ethos. These themes highlight

how the participants understood servant leadership as both a practical and relational way of leading schools, emphasising the connection between personal values, professional duties, and the challenges they faced in their context. Based on the topic and aim of the study, the two predominant questions were: “How do these leaders practise servant leadership?” “How does it enhance the quality of education in their context through a feminist lens?”

The findings are organised in line with the six themes, creating a cohesive narrative that ties the participants’ experiences to the research objectives. Each theme represents a unique aspect of servant leadership practice, shedding light on how female principals navigate leadership in under-resourced rural settings while promoting learner growth and staff involvement. The first research question explored how female principals understood and practised servant leadership in under-resourced school environments. It also sought to determine what values, behaviours, and practices they associated with servant leadership through care and service. The question also aimed to identify how their leadership was evolving to respond to environmental issues such as poverty, resource scarcity, and gendered norms.

Leadership as a Moral and Spiritual Calling

Female principals perceived their leadership role as a moral and spiritual calling. The participants did not describe leadership as a management task but rather as a calling grounded in care, service, and compassion, shaped by religious beliefs and contextual realities. P3 shared:

My leadership is about being a father–mother figure to these kids. Most of them don’t live with their parents, and some have never seen their fathers. That makes me feel like I’ve been called to fill that gap.

This calling extended beyond the scope of professional duty to encompass emotional labour and familial care, particularly in schools where poverty, trauma, and family breakdown were prevalent. Some of these participants described their schools as an extension of the family home. For example:

I always say we are not just running schools; we are raising children. Implementing such initiatives requires more than just policies; it necessitates genuine emotional investment. (P1)

Teachers affirmed that their principals’ leadership extended far beyond instruction. They emphasised how the care-driven ethos of female school leaders shaped the entire school climate. As T2 explained:

Our principal treats each child like her own. It’s not just discipline and books—she checks if they’ve eaten or if something’s wrong at home.

Similarly, T1 remarked:

There’s heart in my principal’s leadership. You feel it in how she speaks, how she comforts, and how she shows up every day, even when she’s exhausted.

In the same vein, T8 noted:

My principal doesn’t see herself above anyone. She leads by walking with us, not over us. That builds trust and unity.

The servant leadership values embedded in the schools shaped this conceptualisation of leadership. Some participants referred to their faith as a source of direction and a means of coping with challenges:

Being a principal here is hard, but I survive because I believe it’s a mission. I was placed here by God for a specific purpose. (P5)

Others characterised leadership as a form of service that emulates the image of Jesus Christ, rejecting authoritative and dictatorial approaches in favour of humility and meekness. P2 highlighted:

Jesus didn't rule from above. He served. That's the model I work based on. I'm here to walk with people, not over them.

Participants also positioned their roles as holistic caregivers to both staff and learners. As P4 noted:

I'm not just here for the marks. I care if a child has eaten or if a teacher is overwhelmed. It means to lead with purpose.

The participants shared that their leadership stemmed from a deep connection with spiritual values and a strong sense of moral duty, even while navigating the challenges of working in under-resourced school environments. Their stories revealed that this calling gave them the strength to push through difficulties, influencing how they built trust, managed stress, and made decisions. This perspective aligns with African feminist views on leadership, which highlight the importance of ethical responsibility, being responsive to context, and prioritising collective well-being (Mama, 2001; Moorosi, 2021). Unlike traditional leadership models that focus on authority and control, the women leaders in this study regarded leadership as an act of care, justice, and service. By redefining power as something relational and restorative, they exemplified a more compassionate and inclusive style of leadership.

Crucially, this commitment to servant and care-oriented leadership also inspired teachers to become more engaged in their roles. Teachers noted that principals who treated students and staff with respect and kindness fostered a sense of unity and dedication, which, in turn, built trust and boosted morale. These relational leadership practices not only supported the well-being of both staff and students but also led to better teaching quality and a positive educational environment. Therefore, female leadership in schools with limited resources proves to be both transformative and empowering (Chabaya et al., 2009).

Relationships as the Foundation of Leadership

This theme sheds light on how female principals view relationships as a key part of their leadership identity and efforts to transform their schools. The participants stressed that leadership is fundamentally about relationships, where trust, empathy, and meaningful engagement with staff, students, and the local community are at the heart of their professional practice. In contexts where resources are scarce and formal support lacks, these relationships became crucial for keeping motivation high and promoting positive educational outcomes. P1 remarked:

We're like a family here at this school . . . your worries are my worries. That's why teachers stick around, and students flourish.

Participants frequently described the leadership as familial, with principals leaning on strong relationships to keep their school thriving. P4 added:

Building relationships fosters trust, and trust fuels commitment. That's the driving force behind our school.

They emphasised that trust was nurtured through genuine care shown through empathy, dependability, and being present. P2 pointed out:

You can't achieve success without relationships. It's true in classrooms and staffrooms alike. Participants connected relational leadership to school success, noting that when resources were tight, emotional and social support became essential for motivating the team and managing effectively.

P3 highlighted:

When people feel acknowledged and valued, they act differently. That's how we achieve results, even when we're short on resources.

Female teachers echoed this sentiment, sharing how ongoing care and support from their principals boosted their sense of belonging, commitment, and drive to enhance teaching quality:

She knows our stories. When I faced personal challenges, she stepped in—not to judge, but to support. That's why I give my all here. (T1)

T2 added:

We're not just employees to her—we're individuals. That kind of respect fosters loyalty and motivates us to work harder.

T3 noted:

Even the little things, like greeting us by name and checking in on us, those gestures really count.

This relational approach also applied to students and their families. T4 observed:

When students feel cared for, they engage more. The relationships we build with them, and their families change their perspective on school.

T5 emphasised:

We make it a point to talk and listen. That time we invest builds the trust we need to function as a cohesive team.

These insights show that female principals really know how to use connection and care to create strong, resilient schools. Their style of feminist leadership is rooted in empathy, mutual accountability, and emotional strength rather than relying on top-down authority. This approach not only motivates teachers but also leads to better educational outcomes (Mama, 2001; Moorosi, 2021). In communities that face challenges, these relationships form the backbone of their leadership and help sustain their schools.

Collective Leadership and Shared Vision

This theme demonstrates that female principals approached leadership as a collaborative effort rooted in a shared sense of purpose and responsibility. Instead of seeing themselves as the sole decision-makers, the participants described leadership as a process that empowered staff to work together in making decisions, addressing challenges, and keeping the school running smoothly, even in tough times. P2 shared:

I don't make decisions alone. We come together as a team, we discuss, and we figure out the best path forward together. That's how we create a sense of ownership.

The principals highlighted the importance of open dialogue and transparency in building trust, sparking innovation, encouraging initiative, and navigating the complexities of school environments. P4 also noted:

People are more willing to try if they feel their voices matter. My job is to lead, yes, but also to listen and integrate their input.

Collective leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing staff well-being and fostering professional growth. When principals involve teachers in planning and decision-making, it creates a sense of value and belonging, particularly in environments where educators often feel overwhelmed. As P6 shared:

We plan everything together—academic programmes, events, even discipline strategies. That's why people stay. They feel part of something bigger than their job.

P5 added:

If I try to do this school by myself, it will collapse. We divide tasks, take turns, and help each other. That's our strength.

Teachers echoed these sentiments, noting increased commitment, motivation, and engagement in their instruction. Moreover, principals encouraged community involvement and collective reflection through peer feedback and regular debriefs, which helped to strengthen cohesion and promote continuous improvement. These practices highlight how female leadership, grounded in collaboration, equity, and a shared vision, can enhance school resilience and the quality of education, even in the face of systemic and gendered challenges (Mama, 2001; Moorosi, 2021; Oplatka & Tamir, 2020).

The second research question aimed to delve into how female principals who practised servant leadership enhanced the quality of education, especially when faced with gender-related and structural challenges. It sought to uncover how their approach to servant leadership boosted teacher motivation, nurtured student well-being, and strengthened school resilience. Additionally, the question explored how these leaders navigated structural inequalities while fostering inclusive and effective school environments.

Holistic Development of Learners

Female principals focused on the overall development of their students rather than just their academic achievements. They measured success by looking at emotional well-being, social skills, and readiness for life, embodying a whole-child approach rooted in servant leadership and feminist principles that nurtured both intellect and emotion (Blackmore, 2013; Greenleaf, 1977). P1 shared:

It's not only about grades. Emotional learning is crucial. Some of our kids arrive at school already dealing with trauma. You can't expect them to perform without showing care.

The principals stressed the importance of creating emotionally safe environments to foster communication and support. Issues like hunger, violence, and abuse were prevalent external factors that could obstruct learning, unless emotional needs were prioritised first. P6 remarked:

Some students come here hungry, while others come from abusive situations. If we don't address those problems first, teaching won't be effective. We need to treat them as children, not just students.

Principals also highlighted the importance of social development to prepare students to be responsible citizens:

Of course, academic outcomes matter, but we're also raising future adults, parents, leaders, and community members. That's why we focus on teaching them how to communicate, lead, and treat others with respect. (P2)

Their practices included life skills and leadership programmes, peer mentoring, and classroom discussions on resilience and self-esteem, highlighting how servant leadership creates a nurturing learning environment that boosts educational outcomes (Liden et al., 2008; Spears, 2010). These leaders emphasised holistic learning, even amid performance pressures. P5 shared:

We're always being asked for results, results, results. But I constantly remind my team: the child comes first. If we only chase grades, we lose the essence of education.

This leadership approach values inclusive, learner-centred education over corporate-style performance metrics. By nurturing the whole child, the female principals illustrated how servant leadership not only

supported learner development but also improved the quality of education in underprivileged settings (Blackmore, 2013; Greenleaf, 1977).

Motivation Through Empathy and Staff Development

This theme dives into how female principals harnessed empathy, emotional support, and professional development to inspire and retain teachers in challenging, resource-limited school settings. The participants consistently highlighted the significance of grasping teachers' personal and professional situations, asserting that motivation and performance were deeply intertwined with feeling acknowledged, supported, and valued. This perspective resonates with the principles of servant leadership, which focuses on caring for others, and the feminist ethic of care, which emphasises the importance of human connections in educational leadership (Blackmore, 2013; Greenleaf, 1977). P2 shared:

I don't just hand out tasks. I really get to know my teachers' challenges. That's what keeps them motivated. Some are single parents, and others commute long distances. If I ignore that, I risk losing them.

In challenging contexts marked by low pay and difficult conditions, these principals led with compassion, opting for understanding rather than punishment. P2 added:

When you listen to your staff, it changes everything. If you overlook them, you'll lose them. Even a quick chat in the hallway can lift someone's spirits.

Teachers echoed the positive effects of this approach:

When our principal checks in on us – not just about work, but how we're doing personally – it reminds me that I'm more than just an employee here. I feel valued as a person. (T3)

She noticed when I was having a tough time, and instead of judging me, she helped lighten my workload. That simple act made me want to stay and give my all. (T2)

The principals also encouraged professional development by delegating tasks, recognising individual strengths, and creating leadership roles:

One teacher was feeling stuck, disengaged, and frustrated. I crafted a new position for her that played to her strengths. She thrived and eventually got promoted to deputy at another school. (P3)

I don't view myself as the sole leader. Everyone has something valuable to offer. I give teachers the freedom to lead, and that makes a real difference. (P4)

Supportive practices included giving regular feedback, keeping open-door policies, and celebrating achievements:

We really affirm our teachers. That's how we build loyalty and get results. You can't just criticise—you have to celebrate the small wins too. (P6)

These teachers work wonders with so little. I make it a point to let them know I see their efforts. My role is to shield them from burnout and help them believe in the impact of their work. (P5)

These insights show that servant leadership—which involves empathy, listening, and genuine care—boosts teacher motivation, resilience, and professional growth. Feminist leadership takes this a step

further by being transformative, challenging traditional hierarchies, and nurturing a culture of care that supports learning, especially in failing systems (Liden et al., 2008; Spears, 2010).

Balancing Accountability With Servant Ethos

This theme highlights the journey of female principals as they undertake the tough balancing act of meeting bureaucratic accountability demands while embracing a servant leadership style rooted in care, relationships, and ethics. The participants shared the intricate professional and emotional challenges they faced while juggling district goals, union expectations, and community scrutiny without sacrificing their commitment to inclusive, human-centred leadership. As Setlhodi (2022) pointed out, female leaders in challenging school contexts show remarkable resilience by staying focused on the core aspects of their roles, even when they encounter unique obstacles and insufficient support. As P6 mentioned:

We're overwhelmed, but our teamwork and shared vision keep us anchored. If we lose that, we lose the essence of our work.

The principals recognised the high-performance benchmarks set by education authorities, which include student outcomes, reporting obligations, and curriculum timelines. Yet they took proactive steps to protect their staff from undue stress by managing administrative duties and creating a nurturing work environment. P2 shared:

We operate as if no one is watching, because it's all about integrity. You can't just chase numbers and overlook the people behind them.

These leaders skilfully balanced accountability with genuine care, meeting the demands of the system while ensuring their teams felt protected. They viewed responsibility as a moral obligation, not merely a set of rules to follow. Serving the system never took precedence over serving their people. P3 remarked:

Sure, we answer to the department, but our real strength lies in our bond. That's what truly gets the work done.

Other principals shared how they shielded their staff from overwhelming demands, advocated for their needs in district meetings, and reinterpreted policies to uphold human dignity. P5 noted:

Sometimes, I have to stand up against unrealistic deadlines. If I don't, my staff pays the price. I make sure to explain our situation and focus on what's achievable without burning anyone out.

Teachers echoed this sentiment, highlighting how principals served as a buffer against institutional pressures while still driving school success:

Our principal takes on a lot of the administrative burden so we can concentrate on teaching. She fights for us in meetings. That kind of leadership inspires us to give our best. (T1)

Even when things get chaotic, we never feel isolated. She ensures we're informed, prepared, and supported, which is a rarity in this system. (T2)

She knows how to balance the rules with the people. Yes, we have targets, but she never allows the pressure to ruin our culture. That's why we stick around. (T3)

Participants also talked about the emotional labour involved in this balancing act, which kept school operations running smoothly while maintaining their identity as compassionate, approachable leaders. P4 reflected:

Some days, it feels like I'm managing two schools—the one the district wants to see on paper, and the real one I'm trying to nurture with my team.

Despite these challenges, principals were committed to practising servant leadership. They saw their power not in fear or authority but in their ability to perform under pressure with compassion and collective resilience. P3 added:

We keep the school running, sure. But we also keep the people thriving. That's what makes our model successful.

Female school leaders embrace a hybrid leadership style that blends the demands of their schools with a focus on relationships. Even when faced with challenges, their feminist approach fosters care, mutual respect, and a sense of justice, pushing back against dehumanising systems. They redefine what “accountability” means in education, shifting the focus to being accountable to people rather than just adhering to policies.

Discussion

The study's findings revealed that servant leadership among female principals in under-resourced South African schools is viewed as a relational governance practice. This approach fosters authority, trust, and educational improvement through collective efforts. The findings suggest that in these contexts, servant leadership acts as a framework of trust, where the legitimacy of leadership stems from ongoing ethical interactions with teachers, students, and the community, rather than from traditional bureaucratic power. This perspective shifts the role of principals from being merely individual managers to being part of a collective moral initiative grounded in care, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

A key aspect of this interpretation is the idea of leadership as a moral calling. While earlier research highlights that female principals often rely on ethical values in their leadership (De Bruyn & Mestry, 2020), this study conceptualises this moral focus as a means of building relational trust, which is essential for schools to operate effectively despite significant structural challenges. Moral commitment serves as the foundation for principals to establish credibility, emotional safety, and collaboration among staff and the community. This aligns with the work of Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer (2021), who stress the importance of relational trust in school improvement, and resonates with feminist scholarship that acknowledges care and emotional labour as valid leadership practices (Mama, 2001; Moorosi, 2021). In this context, moral calling transcends personal belief; it evolves into a relational strategy that enhances organisational stability and fosters collective commitment in environments where resources are limited.

The findings also offer a new perspective on collective leadership, viewing it as a shift in how power is understood within school governance. Instead of seeing authority as a top-down control mechanism, participants described leadership as a shared responsibility that involves collaboration among teachers and community members. This supports Oplatka and Tamir's (2020) argument that collaborative leadership can build resilience in challenging situations. Rooted in feminist theory, these practices embody a non-dominant approach to leadership that prioritises empowerment, participation, and accountability in relationships. The principles of servant leadership—such as empathy, inclusivity, and service—further enhance this perspective, demonstrating how leadership can uphold organisational accountability while also encouraging democratic involvement.

In schools with limited resources, this collective governance model has real consequences for the quality of education. By nurturing supportive professional environments, principals were able to enhance teacher morale, reduce burnout, and maintain consistent instruction even in the face of structural challenges. When teachers feel appreciated and students acquire a sense of belonging, schools cultivate a stronger atmosphere of engagement that not only leads to academic gains but also supports social and emotional

growth. The focus on comprehensive learner development aligns with Blackmore's (2013) critique of restrictive performance-based accountability systems, underscoring the significance of socio-emotional learning and inclusive school cultures for achieving long-term educational success.

The study highlights how teacher motivation is fostered through empathy, recognition, and professional development instead of relying solely on formal incentives. This aligns with the findings of Katitaş et al. (2022), who emphasised the positive link between servant leadership and teacher morale. In situations where financial rewards and material resources are scarce, relational leadership practices become essential motivational tools. Principals can improve commitment by acknowledging teachers' efforts, providing opportunities for professional development, and cultivating supportive professional relationships. These practices help build relational trust, which acts as a form of social capital that supports school improvement in environments with limited resources.

Another important insight from the findings is the need to balance bureaucratic accountability with the values of servant leadership. Principals employed a dual approach of compliance and ethical adaptation, meeting policy requirements while still prioritising care-oriented leadership practices. Using Naidoo and Potokri's (2021) framework of contextualised leadership in postcolonial education systems, this study illustrates how leaders can navigate institutional constraints without sacrificing relational values. These practices show that leadership involves both political and moral dimensions, especially for women working within gendered institutional frameworks. This study contributes three significant theoretical insights into the field of educational leadership. First, it reconceptualises moral calling as the process of building relational trust, demonstrating that ethical commitment serves as a practical governance tool that allows school communities to function effectively despite structural inequalities. Second, the study redefines collective leadership as a type of relational power, challenging traditional hierarchical models of school leadership by illustrating how authority can emerge from collaboration, shared responsibility, and participatory decision-making.

The research expands on servant leadership theory by placing it within feminist and intersectional frameworks. It shows how female leaders in under-resourced areas of the Global South practise servant leadership not just as a philosophy but also to adapt and resist challenges. While traditional views of servant leadership have faced criticism for being too managerial and lacking political engagement (Blackmore, 2013), this study reveals that in marginalised contexts, it can serve as a transformative practice rooted in feminist ethics of care (Mama, 2001; Moorosi, 2021). Intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989) sheds light on how these leaders navigate the complex layers of gender inequality, socioeconomic challenges, and pressures from policies that demand accountability.

By examining servant leadership through these relational and intersectional perspectives, the study offers a deeper understanding of leadership in the Global South, where success often hinges on building relationships rather than relying solely on institutional authority. The findings also carry significant implications for fostering social change within educational systems. By illustrating how leadership that is relational, empathetic, and collaborative can enhance school communities in under-resourced areas, the study underscores the potential of leadership practices grounded in care and shared responsibility to tackle educational disparities. Acknowledging and institutionalising these leadership styles could lead to more inclusive governance models that prioritise emotional intelligence, relational trust, and community involvement alongside technical leadership skills.

Conclusion

This study focused on understanding how female school principals in low socioeconomic contexts of South Africa practise servant leadership, and how these practices enhance educational quality despite them facing structural and gender-related challenges. The participants shared that their leadership is rooted in moral and relational values like empathy, responsibility, and care. By engaging in emotional labour and

daily interactions, these principals fostered trust among teachers and learners. They improved teacher motivation through affirmation, mentorship, and opportunities for professional development, while also cultivating inclusive school cultures through shared and participatory leadership. Additionally, the principals expanded the concept of educational excellence by focusing on the holistic development of learners instead of just academic success. In doing so, they pushed back against narrow accountability measures and prioritised the social and emotional well-being of students alongside their academic achievements. Although policy discussions often neglect the impact of female school leaders, the findings highlight the crucial role these principals play in creating supportive and resilient school environments.

The study adds to the understanding of servant leadership and feminist leadership theory by demonstrating how leadership focused on relationships and care can challenge patriarchal norms in educational contexts. The findings back up De Bruyn and Mestry's (2020) claim that feminist leadership is inherently moral, revealing that female principals in underprivileged areas lead effectively by using emotional intelligence, ethical commitment, and relational authority. Thus, servant leadership is seen not just as a practice for social justice but also as a caring philosophy grounded in shared responsibility and relational accountability. Notably, the principals managed to balance relational leadership with the demands of bureaucratic accountability, proving that care-based leadership can align with policy requirements and maintain performance even in environments with limited resources.

On a practical level, the findings emphasise the importance of leadership development and policy training programmes that focus on gender sensitivity, relational leadership skills, instructional leadership, and emotional literacy. Such training can better prepare leaders to address the complex social and institutional challenges faced by disadvantaged schools. While the study included only 12 participants, it lays a solid groundwork for future research, including longitudinal and comparative studies that explore how feminist and relational leadership practices can impact school improvement and educational equity in various contexts.

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