Servant Leadership and Social Interaction in Christian Education: An Exegetical Study of Matthew 20:26-28 at SMP Negeri 2 Kuala Pembuang

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the implementation of servant leadership as a biblical model of educational leadership and its influence on social interaction within a public junior high school context. Grounded in an exegetical analysis of Matthew 20:26-28, this research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Kuala Pembuang, where Christian students constitute a minority group of five learners with one Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher. Employing a qualitative case study design, this research integrates a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) with simple semi-structured interviews involving the CRE teacher and Christian students. The findings demonstrate that servant leadership, as taught by Jesus in Matthew 20:26-28, is meaningfully embodied in daily teaching practices through humility, relational care, sacrificial service, and non-authoritarian leadership. The CRE teacher's leadership is characterized by patience, availability, empathy, and moral consistency, which significantly shape the quality of social interaction in the classroom. Students experience a learning environment marked by trust, emotional safety, mutual respect, and cooperative relationships. The study further reveals that in a pluralistic public school context, servant leadership functions not only as a pedagogical approach but also as a form of ethical and spiritual witness. Christ's self-giving model of leadership emerges as the normative foundation for Christian educational practice. Pedagogically, servant leadership proves effective in fostering healthy social interaction and moral formation among students. This study contributes to the discourse on Christian educational leadership by affirming the transformative power of Christ-centered service in shaping relational and social life in schools.

Keywords: *Servant Leadership, Christian Religious Education, Social Interaction*

INTRODUCTION

Leadership in education is not merely a matter of authority and administration but fundamentally concerns moral influence, relational responsibility, and the capacity to shape human character. In contemporary educational contexts, especially within pluralistic public schools, the quality of leadership demonstrated by teachers significantly affects not only academic achievement but also patterns of social interaction among

students. Christian education, in particular, places a distinctive emphasis on leadership that is grounded in service, humility, and self-giving love. This vision is powerfully articulated in Matthew 20:26-28, where Jesus redefines greatness not as domination but as servanthood. This biblical paradigm offers a critical theological foundation for understanding servant leadership as a transformative force in educational relationships. At SMP Negeri 2 Kuala Pembuang, teachers operate within a diverse social and cultural environment where patterns of authority, interaction, cooperation, and conflict are constantly negotiated. In such a setting, leadership is not exercised only through formal positions but also through everyday pedagogical encounters that shape how students relate to one another. Social interaction in schools is deeply influenced by how teachers model power, discipline, empathy, and mutual respect. When leadership is expressed through coercion or hierarchy alone, social relations often become competitive, fragmented, or fear-driven. Conversely, when leadership is exercised through service, relational trust and collaborative interaction are more likely to flourish. Matthew 20:26-28 presents a radical inversion of conventional leadership logic. Jesus states, *"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* This passage situates servant leadership not merely as an ethical option but as a Christological imperative rooted in the self-giving mission of Christ Himself (Blomberg, 1992; France, 2007). Leadership, according to Jesus, is authenticated not by status but by sacrificial service. In the context of Christian education, this redefinition of leadership has profound implications for how teachers exercise authority and cultivate social interaction within the classroom. Previous studies in educational leadership have widely affirmed that relational and ethical leadership models significantly enhance school climate, student engagement, and moral development (Greenleaf, 1977; Northouse, 2019). Servant leadership, in particular, has been shown to foster trust, cooperation, empathy, and collective responsibility. Within Christian pedagogy, servant leadership is not only a functional leadership style but also an expression of discipleship, where teachers are called to imitate Christ in their relationships with students (Palmer, 1998; Van Brummelen, 2009). However, many empirical studies remain largely theoretical or are conducted within explicitly Christian institutions, leaving a research gap regarding how servant leadership operates in public schools where Christianity exists as a minority voice.

Social interaction is a crucial dimension of adolescent development, especially at the junior high school level, where students experience intense psychological, emotional, and social transitions. Patterns of peer interaction are shaped by power dynamics, communication styles, emotional regulation, and moral modeling from teachers. Positive social interaction is associated with empathy, cooperation, conflict resolution, and mutual respect, while negative interaction often manifests in bullying, exclusion, verbal aggression, and social fragmentation (Wentzel, 2015). Teacher leadership plays a decisive role in mediating these interactional patterns. When leadership is exercised through fear-based control, students often replicate similar power-driven behaviors. When leadership is grounded in service and care, students are more likely to develop prosocial attitudes. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how the servant leadership paradigm of Christ is understood, embodied, and translated into daily educational practice, and how

it influences patterns of social interaction among students and teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Kuala Pembuang. This research is guided by three main questions: How do Christian teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Kuala Pembuang understand the concept of servant leadership in light of Matthew 20:26-28? How is this servant leadership manifested in their pedagogical and relational practices? What impact does servant leadership have on the quality of social interaction within the school environment? By employing an exegetically informed qualitative case study approach, this study seeks to bridge biblical theology, educational leadership theory, and empirical classroom reality. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both Christian education and general educational leadership discourse. It affirms that Christ's model of leadership remains normatively relevant for contemporary educational ministry. It demonstrates that leadership grounded in service is not only spiritually meaningful but also socially transformative. This study offers insights for teacher formation, school leadership development, and character education programs that seek to cultivate a culture of mutual service, respect, and healthy social interaction in pluralistic school contexts.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a collaborative approach between a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and a simple empirical field study through interviews. The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Kuala Pembuang, where Christian students constitute a minority group consisting of five students, with one Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher serving as the primary participant. The qualitative-exegetical case study approach was selected in order to capture both the theological depth of Matthew 20:26-28 and its lived pedagogical expression within a real educational setting. This design allows for an integrated understanding of servant leadership as a biblical concept, an educational theory, and a practical lived experience. The SLR was conducted to establish a strong theoretical and theological foundation for the study. Academic sources were systematically identified through reputable databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed journals, and major theological publishers. Keywords used included "servant leadership in education," "Christian leadership," "social interaction in schools," "Matthew 20:26-28," and "teacher moral authority." The inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and theological commentaries published primarily within the last fifteen years, although classical works on servant leadership were also included due to their foundational nature. The selected literature was then analyzed thematically to identify key concepts related to servant leadership, ethical authority, relational pedagogy, and social interaction. These thematic findings served as the conceptual framework for interpreting the empirical data. The empirical component of the study consisted of semi-structured interviews with the one Christian Religious Education teacher and informal reflective interviews with the five Christian students. The teacher interview focused on understanding perceptions of servant leadership, practical expressions of leadership in daily teaching, challenges in practicing servant leadership within a public school context, and perceived impacts on student social interaction. The student interviews explored their experiences of teacher leadership, perceptions of teacher behavior, and how such leadership influences their relationships with peers. Due to the small number of Christian students, interviews were

conducted in a conversational and non-intrusive manner to ensure comfort and ethical sensitivity. Data collection was carried out over a focused period of observation and interviews. The small-scale nature of the study reflects the minority context of Christian education within the school while allowing for in-depth qualitative reflection. The interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. Meaningful units of data were coded based on emerging themes related to servant leadership, authority, service, humility, relational care, and social interaction. The codes were organized into broader interpretative themes. These empirical themes were then dialogically compared with the SLR findings and the exegetical insights from Matthew 20:26–28. This integrative analysis enabled a triangulation between biblical text, scholarly discourse, and lived educational practice. Although the study is limited in scale due to the small number of Christian participants, it offers rich contextual insight into how servant leadership is embodied and experienced within a minority Christian setting in public education. The methodological design thus supports both theological depth and empirical credibility in examining the relationship between servant leadership and social interaction in Christian education.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that servant leadership, as articulated in Matthew 20:26-28, is not merely understood as a theological ideal by the Christian Religious Education teacher at SMP Negeri 2 Kuala Pembuang, but is also consciously embodied in daily pedagogical and relational practices, particularly in the context of social interaction among students. The exegetical analysis of Matthew 20:26–28 shows that Jesus intentionally subverts the dominant leadership paradigm of power and hierarchy by presenting servanthood (*διάκονος, diakonos*) and self-giving sacrifice as the true measure of greatness. The phrase "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" establishes service not as an optional virtue but as the fundamental structure of Christian leadership. Moreover, the reference to the Son of Man who "*did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many*" anchors servant leadership in Christ's redemptive mission, making it both an ethical mandate and a spiritual imitation of Christ Himself. This theological foundation becomes the interpretive lens through which the practical leadership behavior of the teacher is understood in this case study. Empirical data from interviews indicate that the CRE teacher perceives leadership primarily as a moral and relational responsibility rather than a positional authority. The teacher consistently emphasized that being a leader in the classroom means being willing to listen, to serve students' needs first, and to place personal comfort below the well-being of learners. This perception aligns closely with the biblical structure of Matthew 20:26-28, where leadership is defined from below rather than from above. The teacher explicitly rejected authoritarian teaching styles, stating that coercive control only produces surface obedience, whereas servant leadership cultivates inner willingness and moral respect. This finding confirms the SLR literature which consistently associates servant leadership with trust-building, emotional safety, and relational credibility in educational settings. Theologically, the teacher's self-understanding reflects an internalization of Christological humility rather than a functional adoption of leadership techniques. In terms of daily pedagogical practice, servant leadership was manifested through several observable patterns, including patience in instruction, availability outside

class hours, non-discriminative attitudes toward students, and a willingness to assist learners who struggle academically or socially. Students testified that the teacher often sacrifices personal time to provide additional guidance and emotional support. This sacrificial availability is a direct practical translation of Christ's self-giving posture in Matthew 20:28. The concept of "giving one's life" is not interpreted literally in the school context, but symbolically through the giving of time, energy, emotional investment, and personal convenience. This confirms that servant leadership in education operates through everyday acts of self-emptying rather than dramatic gestures of sacrifice.

The impact of servant leadership on social interaction among the five Christian students was particularly evident in the formation of relational attitudes characterized by respect, openness, empathy, and cooperative behavior. Students reported that they feel safe to express difficulties, admit mistakes, and seek help without fear of condemnation. This emotional safety is a critical precondition for healthy social interaction in adolescent development. The teacher's non-authoritarian approach reduces relational distance and transforms the classroom into a community of shared growth rather than a hierarchy of fear. This finding is in strong agreement with social learning theory, which posits that students imitate relational patterns modeled by authority figures. When leadership is exercised through care and humility, students learn to interact with one another in similar ways. Servant leadership was found to significantly shape conflict resolution patterns among students. Instead of responding to interpersonal conflict with punishment-oriented control, the teacher encourages dialogue, empathy, and mutual understanding. Students are guided to reflect on their behavior, listen to opposing perspectives, and seek reconciliation. This restorative approach to conflict reflects the redemptive orientation embedded in Matthew 20:28, where service is connected to reconciliation and the restoration of broken relationships. The classroom thus becomes a micro-context of redemptive social interaction where power is exercised not to dominate but to heal. The SLR findings strongly support the empirical observations by affirming that servant leadership promotes prosocial behavior, collaborative learning, and ethical maturity. Scholarly literature consistently indicates that when teachers function as servant-leaders, social interaction patterns shift from competition to cooperation, from exclusion to inclusion, and from fear to trust. What distinguishes the present study is the explicit integration of these educational insights with biblical exegesis, showing that the social benefits of servant leadership are not accidental outcomes but theological consequences of Christ-centered leadership. An important result of this study is the identification of servant leadership as a source of moral authority rather than institutional authority. The teacher's influence over student behavior does not primarily stem from formal regulations or disciplinary mechanisms, but from personal credibility built through consistent service. Students obey not out of fear of punishment, but out of relational trust. This demonstrates that moral authority in Christian education is relationally constructed through integrity, humility, and sacrificial care. This pattern is the precise educational manifestation of Jesus' redefinition of greatness in Matthew 20:26–27, where leadership influence flows from service rather than coercion.

The minority context of Christianity at SMP Negeri 2 Kuala Pembuang further intensifies the significance of servant leadership. With only five Christian students and one CRE

teacher, leadership is exercised within a pluralistic religious environment. In such a setting, overt doctrinal influence is limited, but ethical witness through daily conduct becomes highly visible. The teacher acknowledged that every action is implicitly observed by students and colleagues of different faith backgrounds. Consequently, servant leadership functions not only as an educational strategy but also as a silent form of interreligious witness. This finding is consistent with the SLR literature on Christian leadership in public institutions, which emphasizes that moral authenticity is the primary mode of Christian presence in pluralistic spaces. From the students' perspective, servant leadership produces a sense of belonging and dignity. Students expressed that they do not feel marginalized despite being a religious minority. Instead, they feel valued and protected within the classroom community. This sense of dignity directly reflects the anthropological implication of Matthew 20:26-28, where human worth is not determined by social status but by shared participation in mutual service. The internalization of this value reshapes how students perceive themselves and others, fostering inclusive social interaction.

At the same time, the study also identifies challenges in consistently practicing servant leadership. The teacher faces structural constraints such as limited time, administrative demands, and the emotional burden of pastoral responsibility. Maintaining a posture of service requires continuous spiritual discipline, prayerful dependence, and emotional resilience. This finding aligns with the SLR which emphasizes that servant leadership is not a natural disposition but a spiritually cultivated discipline that requires ongoing formation. Without inner spiritual renewal, the practice of servant leadership risks degenerating into emotional exhaustion or functional burnout. The exegetical dimension of Matthew 20:26–28 provides a critical theological safeguard against such burnout by grounding servant leadership not in human altruism alone but in participation in Christ's own self-giving life. The teacher explicitly stated that the strength to serve consistently is derived from personal prayer and reflection on Christ's humility. This confirms that servant leadership in Christian education is sustained not merely by ethical commitment but by spiritual communion with Christ. In synthesis, the integration of SLR, biblical exegesis, and field data demonstrates that servant leadership profoundly shapes the quality of social interaction in the school context. It transforms relational patterns, redefines authority, nurtures emotional safety, strengthens moral formation, and promotes inclusive community life. Matthew 20:26-28 is thus not only a theological text but a practical pedagogical blueprint that finds concrete expression in the daily rhythms of classroom interaction at SMP Negeri 2 Kuala Pembuang. The study confirms that when leadership is grounded in service, social interaction becomes not merely functional but redemptive, reflecting the very character of Christ in the educational sphere.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how the biblical concept of servant leadership, as articulated in Matthew 20:26-28, is understood and practiced by Christian Religious Education teachers and how it shapes social interaction within a public secondary school context. Through the integration of exegetical analysis, a Systematic Literature Review, and simple interviews with one CRE teacher and five Christian students at SMP Negeri 2 Kuala Pembuang, this research has demonstrated that servant leadership is not merely a

theological ideal but a lived pedagogical reality that significantly influences relational dynamics in the school environment. The exegetical reading of Matthew 20:26–28 confirms that Jesus radically redefined leadership as service rooted in self-giving love. Greatness in the kingdom of God is measured not by power, status, or control, but by willingness to serve and even to sacrifice for others. This Christological foundation provides a normative framework for Christian leadership in education, positioning teachers not as rulers over students but as servants who nurture, guide, and empower learners. The empirical findings of this study show that this biblical vision is meaningfully embodied in daily teaching practices through patience, availability, relational care, and a non-authoritarian posture toward students. The study reveals that servant leadership contributes significantly to the quality of social interaction among students. The CRE teacher's consistent modeling of humility, empathy, and sacrificial service has fostered a classroom climate characterized by trust, emotional safety, mutual respect, and cooperative relationships. Students feel valued, heard, and supported, which in turn encourages openness, honesty, and prosocial behavior. Conflict is addressed through dialogue and restorative processes rather than punitive domination, reflecting the redemptive orientation of Christ's own ministry. These findings affirm that servant leadership functions as a powerful catalyst for healthy social interaction and moral formation in the school context. The minority status of Christian students in this public school setting further highlights the missional and ethical significance of servant leadership. In an environment where explicit religious influence is limited, the teacher's lived example becomes the primary medium of Christian witness. Servant leadership thus operates not only as an educational strategy but also as a silent testimony to the values of the gospel. The study confirms that integrity, humility, and consistent service transcend religious boundaries and contribute positively to interreligious harmony and social cohesion within the school community. This study also recognizes the practical challenges of sustaining servant leadership. Structural pressures such as time constraints, administrative responsibilities, emotional demands, and limited resources can strain a teacher's capacity to serve consistently. The findings underscore that servant leadership cannot be maintained merely through ethical resolve but must be continually nourished through spiritual disciplines, prayer, and reflective engagement with Christ's example. Participation in the self-giving life of Christ, as portrayed in Matthew 20:26-28, emerges as the ultimate source of strength and perseverance for Christian educators. This study enriches the discourse on Christian educational leadership by demonstrating the inseparable relationship between biblical theology and everyday pedagogical practice. It also offers practical implications for teacher formation and school leadership development, emphasizing that educational excellence and healthy social interaction are deeply rooted in spiritual character and ethical consistency. While the findings are limited by the small scale of this case study, they provide valuable contextual insight into the transformative potential of servant leadership in pluralistic public schools. Future research is recommended to expand this investigation across multiple schools, educational levels, and interfaith contexts to further validate and refine the findings. Even so, this study affirms that servant leadership, grounded in the words and life of Christ, remains a vital foundation for nurturing dignified social interaction, moral maturity, and holistic education in contemporary Christian pedagogy.

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