

# Servant Leadership and Teachers' Collaboration: Insights from Rural South African Schools

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the impact of servant leadership on teacher collaboration and the overall quality of education in selected rural secondary schools in South Africa. Despite various policy reforms, these institutions continue to confront challenges such as limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and socio-economic constraints, which exacerbate the educational disparity between rural and urban areas. Servant leadership, characterised by empathy, humility, trust, and empowerment, is acknowledged as a relational and ethical approach that prioritises the well-being and professional development of both educators and learners. Adopting a qualitative case study methodology, the research examined six public primary schools across three provinces, involving six principals and six teachers through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis indicated that servant leadership fosters supportive and psychologically safe environments, enhances teacher motivation, and promotes collaboration via shared decision-making, mentorship, and Professional Learning Communities. Nonetheless, structural and relational challenges, such as heavy workloads, insufficient infrastructure, limited digital access, and low levels of trust, impede sustained

collaboration. The study concludes that while servant leadership is essential for enhancing teacher engagement and collective efficacy, its full impact is realised only when accompanied by intentional systemic support, professional development, and investment in resources, thereby offering practical guidance for policy, leadership training, and school improvement in rural contexts.

**Keywords:** Servant leadership, teachers' collaboration, professional development, rural context.

## 1. Introduction

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of leadership in enhancing teaching and learning, few studies have empirically explored how servant leadership can foster collaboration among teachers in rural schools in South Africa. Existing research on school leadership in the country has primarily concentrated on transformational and instructional leadership models (Bush & Glover, 2014; Myende & Mayifala, 2020). Unfortunately, servant leadership—particularly its emphasis on relationships and collaboration—has not been thoroughly examined in the context of rural education (Makirimani & Naicker, 2024). Although servant leadership is associated with positive teacher attitudes and motivation (Shula, 2023), there remains a lack of robust evidence on how it promotes collaboration and professional development among teachers within the context of rural public schools (Villanueva, 2024). This knowledge gap is significant, as rural schools often rely on collaboration as a means of coping with limited resources and feelings of professional isolation.

From a theoretical standpoint, addressing this gap would extend the discourse on servant leadership by situating it within the real-life challenges of South African rural education, where social justice, community connections, and mutual support are essential for schools to thrive. Investigating how the principles of servant leadership—such as empathy, stewardship, and empowerment—can be transformed into collaborative practices among teachers could help refine current leadership models to better align with African relational values and the specific challenges faced in these contexts (Dube & Matlala, 2023). Consequently, this study aims to explore how principals' servant leadership fosters

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teacher collaboration in South African rural public schools. At its core, this study investigates a crucial yet often neglected aspect: how servant leadership can enhance teacher collaboration. By connecting theory with practical application, it aims to demonstrate how servant leadership can strengthen professional bonds and collective problem-solving. These insights are not only vital for advancing leadership theory; they also provide practical strategies for transforming rural education—where compassionate and collaborative leadership is critical for sustained progress.

Despite the acknowledged significance of leadership in enhancing teaching and learning, there has been limited empirical research in South Africa exploring how servant leadership encourages teacher collaboration in rural schools. Most existing studies focus on transformational and instructional models, leaving a notable gap in understanding the relational and collaborative aspects of servant leadership. This gap is particularly important, as rural schools rely heavily on collaboration to overcome challenges related to resource limitations and professional isolation. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how principals' servant leadership can foster collaboration among teachers.

The study was primarily guided by a central research question:

- How do the servant leadership practices of school principals in rural South African public schools foster teacher collaboration to enhance the quality of education?

## 2. Literature Review

Improving the quality of education in rural schools across South Africa, like in many developing countries, remains a significant challenge. This issue has persisted despite numerous policy reforms introduced since 1994. Rural schools often face obstacles such as poor infrastructure, insufficient teaching resources, a shortage of teachers, and various socio-economic difficulties (Spaull, 2019; Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2018). These challenges contribute to the educational divide between urban and rural areas, which is clearly reflected in the ongoing gaps in student performance (Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025). Leadership is widely acknowledged as a key factor influencing school effectiveness and teacher motivation (Bush, 2020). Among the various leadership styles, servant leadership has begun to gain attention in academic discussions. This approach focuses on core values such as empathy, humility, service, and empowerment, as highlighted by Greenleaf in 1977. In the context of education, servant leadership is regarded as an ethical and relational model that prioritises the development and well-being of both educators and learners (van Dierendonck, 2011). At the same time, teacher collaboration—where educators come together to plan, share, reflect, and enhance their teaching practices—has been recognised as a vital tool for improving teaching quality and learner performance (Stoll et al., 2006; Vangrieken et al., 2015). However, in many rural schools in South Africa, collaboration is often hindered by contextual challenges such as isolation, demanding workloads, and limited time (Nkambule & Mukeredzi, 2017).

This review brings together existing literature to explore how principals' servant leadership can promote teacher collaboration, ultimately leading to better quality education in South African rural schools. It draws on both international and local studies, theoretical frameworks, and empirical evidence to discuss the connections between servant leadership, collaboration, and quality educational outcomes.

The idea of servant-leadership was introduced by Greenleaf in 1977. He pointed out that true leadership starts with a genuine desire to help others, rather than simply seeking power or control (Greenleaf, 1977). Greenleaf believed that the main goal of a servant leader is to help those they lead grow as individuals, ultimately encouraging them to become servants themselves. Building on Greenleaf's foundational ideas, Spears (2010) outlined ten key traits that define servant leadership: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, stewardship, a commitment to helping people grow, and community building. These qualities highlight the relational and ethical aspects of leadership, which focus on serving and caring for others.

Servant leadership has been examined in a variety of organisational contexts, especially in education, where its emphasis on people aligns beautifully with the fundamental values of teaching and learning (van Dierendonck, 2011; Eva et al., 2019). In schools, servant leadership is evident when principals prioritise the needs of teachers and students, create trusting environments, encourage collaborative decision-making, and support professional development (Liden et al., 2015). These leaders act as facilitators who empower others rather than adopting an authoritative role, fostering healthier organisational cultures and enhancing morale (Kainde & Mandagi, 2023). Research further shows that servant leadership can enhance teacher motivation, commitment, and job satisfaction. Liden et al. (2015) found that servant leaders create stronger emotional connections within their teams, which helps improve organisational citizenship behaviours and reduces turnover rates. Similarly, Sendjaya et al. (2019) discovered a positive link between servant leadership and trust, as well as psychological safety—both essential in educational environments. Kunene (2021) also reported that educators viewed servant leadership traits such as humility, empowerment, and active listening as key to enhancing collaboration and professional commitment.

Servant leadership aligns with today's emphasis on ethical and transformational school leadership, which encourages inclusivity and a collective sense of purpose (Northouse, 2021; Parris & Peachey, 2013). By putting service first, servant leaders create environments where everyone feels valued and supported, setting the stage for meaningful advancements in education. Therefore, servant leadership, rooted in altruism and community, continues to be an essential framework for fostering human-centred leadership in education systems around the globe.

## 2.1 Teacher collaboration: Concept and significance

Teacher collaboration involves educators working together to enhance the quality of their teaching practices, share professional knowledge, and collectively improve learner performance (Vangrieken et al., 2015). It marks a move away from teaching in isolation and towards a culture where everyone shares responsibility and engages in ongoing professional development. This collaboration can take many forms, such as planning lessons together, observing each other's classes, co-teaching, mentoring, team teaching, and participating in professional learning communities (Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Getting involved in these activities gives teachers a chance to share their teaching ideas, assess their methods, and develop strategies that cater to the diverse needs of students, particularly in rural schools. When collaboration is meaningful, it fosters trust and builds a sense of collective efficacy among teachers—the belief that they can make a positive difference in student outcomes when they work together (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschanne-Moran, 2007; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). This trajectory provides a structured space for teachers to engage in ongoing inquiry, reflect on data, and share accountability. These collaborative frameworks not only spark innovation but also enhance teachers' motivation and job satisfaction, as they feel appreciated and supported within their learning community (Kelchtermans, 2006). Research has shown that schools fostering a strong culture of collaboration tend to achieve improved learner outcomes and experience higher teacher retention rates (Vangrieken et al., 2017; Ronfeldt et al., 2015).

While fostering collaboration is essential, it inevitably brings certain challenges—especially within rural South African schools. Issues such as limited time, overwhelming workloads, poor infrastructure, and geographical isolation often make it difficult to maintain consistent professional engagement (Nkambule & Mukeredzi, 2017; Spaull, 2019). Moreover, the lack of access to digital tools and professional networks can limit opportunities for virtual collaboration and knowledge sharing (Vali, 2023). Yet, despite these challenges, collaborative practices are vital for both teacher development and learner academic performance and success, particularly in resource-limited settings where peer learning can help bridge the gaps left by insufficient external support.

Furthermore, this researcher contends that strong leadership is crucial in fostering collaboration. School leaders who adopt participative and servant leadership styles often create inclusive

environments in which teachers are encouraged to share their ideas and take collective ownership of school improvement initiatives (Bush, 2020; Harris, 2014; Shula & Heystek, 2024). When leadership emphasises collaboration – by building trust, allocating time, and recognising team efforts – it helps create a sustainable culture of ongoing professional development and innovation (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). Ultimately, teacher collaboration is a fundamental element of effective school improvement and lifelong professional learning, paving the way for more equitable and resilient education systems.

By fostering a servant leadership approach, leaders can build a collaborative professional culture where teachers feel valued, supported, and motivated to pursue shared goals (Eva et al., 2019). By prioritising the well-being and development of others, servant leaders cultivate environments of psychological safety – places where teachers can openly share their ideas, acknowledge their mistakes, and engage in honest conversations without the fear of being judged (Liden et al., 2015; van Dierendonck, 2011). This kind of openness and mutual respect is crucial for fostering the deep professional collaboration that drives school improvement.

This relational leadership style builds collegial trust, enabling teachers to genuinely engage in joint lesson planning, peer mentoring, and reflective discussions (Cerit, 2009). Additionally, servant leadership aligns well with the principles of distributed leadership, where authority and responsibility are shared among members of the organisation instead of being held by a single individual (Hulpia & Devos, 2010; Harris, 2014). In these environments, teachers take on co-leadership roles in designing, implementing, and assessing instructional strategies, which boosts collective efficacy and sparks innovation (Shal and Abu, 2024).

Research is increasingly highlighting how servant leadership can spark professional collaboration and foster organisational learning. For example, Liden et al. (2015) suggest that servant leaders enhance team cohesion and performance by cultivating a culture of service grounded in shared accountability. In a similar vein, Sendjaya et al. (2019) discovered that servant leaders encourage collaborative norms that inculcate both interpersonal trust and team commitment. In South Africa, Makirimani (2024) found that principals who embraced servant leadership – by holding regular team meetings, implementing mentorship programmes, and recognising teachers' contributions – were able to inspire collaboration and creativity, even in settings with limited resources. These insights align with Shula's (2023) observations that the empathy and attentiveness of servant leaders are crucial for maintaining teacher collaboration in rural schools grappling with systemic challenges. Ultimately, servant leadership fosters a sense of belonging to a community and a shared purpose that goes beyond traditional hierarchies. When school leaders prioritise serving, they empower teachers to learn from each other, co-create knowledge, and tackle problems together. Therefore, this researcher believes that this blend of servant leadership and teacher collaboration stands out as a compelling model for sustainable educational transformation, rooted in compassion, participation, and mutual development.

## 2.2 Empirical evidence: Global and African perspectives

Research from various corners of the globe indicates that servant leadership positively influences collaboration, job satisfaction, and organisational citizenship behaviours (Liden et al., 2015; Eva et al., 2019). For example, a study conducted in Turkey by Doğan (2025) examined the effects of servant leadership on teacher well-being and enthusiasm, as well as the moderating influence of distributed leadership. This study found that servant leadership significantly improved teachers' well-being, collaborative engagement, and sense of collective efficacy. Meanwhile, in Asian contexts, Chiniara and Bentein (2016) discovered that servant leaders fostered greater team commitment and collaboration by psychologically empowering their team members. Similarly, Jaiswal and Dhar (2016) found that servant leadership encouraged creativity and teamwork among teachers in Indian schools. These insights indicate that the behaviours associated with servant leadership – especially

empowerment, active listening, and building trust—are valuable for promoting teamwork and shared learning across different cultures. In Sub-Saharan Africa, research highlights the distinct challenges faced by rural schools, including a lack of resources, high poverty rates, and poor infrastructure (Oduro, 2020; Bush & Glover, 2016). Yet, amidst these hurdles, relational leadership practices, particularly servant leadership, have shown encouraging results.

Moreover, studies on teacher collaboration in South African schools (Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2018; Myende & Nhlumayo, 2020) reveal that when principals encourage shared planning and peer learning, teachers experience greater job satisfaction and improved instructional consistency. However, without strong leadership, such collaborative efforts often end up being superficial or short-lived.

### **2.3 Mechanisms linking servant leadership, collaboration, and quality education**

Servant leadership promotes collaboration primarily by fostering trust and establishing psychological safety. According to Edmondson (2018), psychological safety allows team members to express their ideas and take risks without fear of adverse consequences. Servant leaders cultivate this environment by demonstrating empathy and actively listening, which helps educators feel comfortable discussing their challenges and learning from one another (Liden et al., 2015; Eva et al., 2019). This is particularly important in rural schools in South Africa, where educators often find themselves working in isolation. Shula (2023) found that when principals took the time to listen empathetically to teachers' concerns, staff members were more willing to participate in joint planning and peer observations. Servant leaders play a crucial role in empowering teachers by delegating responsibilities and encouraging them to take the initiative (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010). This sense of empowerment creates a shared ownership of the teaching and learning journey (Hulpia & Devos, 2010). In a study by Kunene (2021), it was found that South African principals who allowed teachers to take the lead in committees and learning teams noticed a boost in collaboration and problem-solving skills among their staff. Likewise, Shal and Abu (2024) highlight that when distributed leadership is grounded in servant leadership principles, it enhances teachers' sense of agency and strengthens their professional identity.

Creating time and structures for collaboration can be quite challenging in many rural schools, primarily due to tight schedules and heavy workloads (Nkambule & Mukeredzi, 2017). Servant leaders play a crucial role in reshaping these schedules and advocating for specific times dedicated to collaboration. They ensure that these collaborative efforts are meaningful, directly tied to student learning, and supported by professional learning communities (Stoll et al., 2006; DuFour & Fullan, 2013). According to Makirimani (2024), principals who intentionally set up weekly sessions for teacher reflection and lesson study groups were able to maintain collaborative practices over the long term. Servant leaders take on the role of mentors and facilitators, guiding continuous professional development (Liden et al., 2015). By tailoring professional development activities to align with teachers' interests and needs, they foster a sense of intrinsic motivation and commitment to learning (Eva et al., 2019). In rural schools across South Africa, servant leadership that incorporates collaborative professional development—such as peer coaching, joint curriculum planning, and classroom observation—plays a crucial role in breaking down professional isolation.

In rural contexts where schools play a vital role in community life, principals who actively involve parents and local stakeholders help to create a stronger sense of collective ownership over education (Heystek, 2022). This collaboration with the wider community not only enhances the connection with parents but also boosts teamwork among teachers, as everyone comes together around common values of service and growth. Current research shows that servant leadership and collaboration go hand in hand, creating a supportive environment that enhances teaching and learning. However, for these improvements to take root, we really need solid systemic support to make it a reality.

### 3. Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach grounded in an interpretivist framework, which emphasises the understanding of human experiences and the meanings individuals attach to social phenomena (Creswell, 2018; Schwandt, 2014). This interpretivist perspective is particularly suitable for research in rural educational settings, as it values subjective insights and the collaborative construction of knowledge between the researcher and participants (Bassey, 2012). Guided by this perspective, the study aimed to explore the lived experiences of principals and teachers regarding servant leadership and teacher collaboration in selected rural public schools in South Africa. By employing a qualitative approach, the research provided an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, offering a rich, context-sensitive understanding of how servant leadership practices influence collaboration and, ultimately, the quality of education (Maree, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To facilitate a comprehensive exploration of how servant leadership manifests in rural school environments, a case study design was selected. Case studies are particularly effective for examining contemporary phenomena in real-world contexts, allowing for a detailed analysis of organisational processes, behaviours, and dynamics (Yin, 2018; Baxter & Jack, 2008). This methodological choice was informed by the recognition that rural schools operate within unique socio-cultural and resource-constrained settings, where the implementation of leadership principles such as servant leadership is shaped by local conditions and broader educational policies (Leithwood et al., 2020). Through this case study approach, the research captured authentic experiences of principals and teachers actively engaged in servant leadership, providing insight into the mechanisms that foster collaboration and enhance the quality of education (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on individuals with specific expertise and relevant experience—namely, principals and teachers with a minimum of three years in public secondary schools located in rural contexts (Campbell et al., 2020). The researcher, through a previous study that centred on principals' servant leadership and teacher motivation, became aware that participants in these schools were already employing the principles of servant leadership. The study included six principals and six teachers from six rural schools across three provinces in South Africa. Data collection employed semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were both flexible and guided, allowing participants to articulate their experiences in their own words while enabling the researcher to probe for clarification and deeper understanding (Morse, 2015). Additional field notes enriched the data, enhancing the study's contextual depth and awareness. The interviews, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of key topics, such as the impact of servant leadership behaviours on collaboration, decision-making, and instructional practices (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). By triangulating multiple data sources, the study's rigor was strengthened, providing a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between leadership practices and teacher collaboration (Patton, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step framework, which involves familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This approach facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and nuanced insights into how servant leadership influences teacher collaboration and educational quality (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis aligned well with the interpretivist perspective, allowing the researcher to transcend mere description and interpret the meanings participants attached to their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

To ensure trustworthiness and rigor, several strategies were employed. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, enabling participants to verify the accuracy of the transcriptions and

interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation across teachers and principals provided a comprehensive perspective, while dependability and confirmability were ensured through a detailed audit trail documenting procedures, decisions, and analytical steps (Flick, 2018; Shenton, 2004). Collectively, these measures ensured that the findings are credible, transferable, and provide valuable insights into how servant leadership fosters collaborative teaching practices in rural South African schools.

### 3.1 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the North-West University Education Faculty Ethics Committee (Ethical Clearance No. NWU-00273-22-A2), as well as consent from the three Provincial Departments of Education. Prior to data collection, all participants signed written informed consent forms, confirming their voluntary participation and their agreement to have the interviews recorded. To enhance the credibility of the data, the researcher returned the interview transcripts to participants for review (Bos, 2020). The researcher took careful measures throughout the study to minimise any potential physical or psychological harm to participants. Furthermore, participants were fully informed of their rights, including the ability to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences (Creswell, 2012). Strict confidentiality was maintained, ensuring that no personal or professional information was disclosed at any stage of the research.

## 4. Presentation of Findings

This section examines the findings in relation to the research questions, highlighting how teachers and principals perceive and experience servant leadership in rural schools, its impact on teacher motivation, and the challenges to collaboration. The data presented herein directly addresses the study's objectives by illustrating the lived experiences and perceptions of leadership practices among participants within their school environments. To uphold confidentiality and protect the identities of participants, all respondents have been anonymised through the use of pseudonyms. Teachers are designated as T1 to T6, while principals are labelled as P1 to P6. These codes are consistently applied throughout the findings to attribute quotes without revealing personal or institutional identities.

### 4.1 Teachers' and principals' understanding of servant leadership practices within their schools

The teachers and principals from the intentionally selected rural schools shared their thoughts on servant leadership practices in the responses below:

T1 expressed that, *for us, servant leadership means our principal serves the staff by fostering an environment of mutual respect and trust. He takes the time to listen to our challenges and ideas, which promotes teamwork and collaborative problem-solving. It's all about working together instead of exerting control.*

T2 described the servant leadership practices in her school like this: *I view servant leadership as prioritizing the needs of both learners and teachers over authority or position. Our principal leads by example, demonstrating kindness and patience in every interaction. This kind of leadership inspires us to put in more effort and cultivates a caring school culture.*

T3 shared his thoughts on servant leadership practices: *To me, servant leadership is rooted in humility and teamwork. Our principal consults with teachers before making decisions and values our opinions. This approach makes us and me personally feel like genuine partners in managing the school. We all work together towards a shared vision and goals, which strengthens our unity.*

T4 offered her insight on servant leadership in her rural school: *Servant leadership is evident when leaders prioritize serving others over wielding authority, using their position to uplift those around them. In our school, this approach fosters trust and*

*openness among staff members. Teachers feel encouraged to grow both personally and professionally. Despite the contextual challenges of this rural school the principal often promotes mentorship and collaboration, creating a leadership style that truly inspires everyone to give their best.*

T5 shared his thoughts on servant leadership practices like this: *To me, servant leadership is all about being approachable and showing empathy to everyone in the school. Our principal truly cares about our well-being and often checks in on us before diving into academic discussions. This caring approach fosters a sense of belonging and emotional safety, which in turn lifts our spirits and strengthens our commitment to our students.*

T6 added his insights to this question by sharing as: *I see servant leadership as a way to uplift others and emphasize empowerment. Our leaders ensure that teachers receive ongoing support through development opportunities and constructive feedback.*

Teachers view servant leadership as a compassionate, inclusive, and empowering approach to leadership, emphasising collaboration, trust, and collective decision-making. This method fosters personal growth, emotional safety, and motivation, contributing to a supportive school culture that enhances teacher engagement, unity, and ultimately, student success (Greenleaf, 1977; Eva et al., 2019).

The six principals shared their thoughts on what servant leadership means to them in their responses:

P1 expressed his understanding in the following words: *Servant leadership is all about serving the school community with compassion, humility, and fairness... By focusing on listening and offering guidance instead of trying to control everything, I believe it builds trust and strengthens teamwork.*

P2 views servant leadership as: *Leading through service and support rather than authority. it's crucial that teachers feel appreciated, heard, and encouraged in their roles. I make it a point to mentor and walk alongside teachers during challenges. When teachers feel valued, they're more likely to give their best to students, which helps create a positive and collaborative school culture.*

P3 shared his understanding of servant leadership as: *In rural schools, servant leadership means being available and responsive to both the personal and professional needs of teachers. This approach fosters a sense of community and trust within the schools.*

PP4 added her perspective, saying *Servant leadership is about listening more than talking and creating space for shared ideas. I ensure that teachers' voices are heard in planning and decision-making processes. This method helps identify real challenges and find practical solutions, reducing tension and building a spirit of cooperation.*

P5 shared some insightful thoughts on this topic: *Servant leadership is all about care, humility, and shared responsibility. I really encourage teachers to step up and leverage their strengths to lead different school activities. This way, everyone can play a meaningful role in the school's development. My focus is on nurturing people rather than trying to control them.*

P6 highlighted the importance of leading with a compassionate heart, prioritizing the well-being of those he leads: *To me, servant leadership is about leading with a genuine heart of service and compassion. I see myself as a guide who supports both teachers and learners in every circumstance. My main aim is to prioritize well-being over performance. When people feel valued and cared for, they naturally strive to give their best.*

Principals see servant leadership as a blend of compassion, inclusivity, and empowerment. They focus on qualities such as empathy, humility, and shared responsibility. By putting trust, collaboration, and well-being at the forefront, they help teachers grow and remain engaged, creating school communities that are participatory and caring. This approach not only boosts collective ownership but also leads to holistic success (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck, 2011; Liden et al., 2014).

The responses from teachers and principals together paint a vivid picture of servant leadership that centres on relationships and prioritising people, especially in rural schools. Both groups consistently link servant leadership with qualities such as empathy, humility, trust, collaboration, and empowerment. Teachers highlight how principals demonstrate servant leadership by actively listening, involving everyone in decision-making, and providing emotional support. They emphasise that servant leaders care about the well-being of both staff and students, creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and teamwork rather than simply issuing commands. This inclusive mindset helps everyone feel a sense of belonging, stay motivated, and share a common purpose, ultimately enhancing the school culture and keeping teachers committed.

On the flip side, principals describe servant leadership as leading with compassion, fairness, and humility. They focus on empowering teachers, mentoring them, and encouraging open communication, which highlights a leadership style that prioritises serving rather than controlling. They see themselves as facilitators, creating spaces where teachers feel appreciated and capable of making meaningful contributions to the school's vision. The emphasis on listening and collaboration aligns perfectly with teachers' beliefs, reinforcing a culture of partnership and shared responsibility.

Both teachers and principals view servant leadership as a transformative approach that fosters personal growth, strengthens relationships, and enhances overall school performance. In rural areas, where resources can be scarce, this leadership style is particularly powerful, as it promotes emotional safety, trust, and mutual support. The findings show that servant leadership goes beyond being merely a management tactic; it is a moral and relational practice that brings a human touch to educational leadership and encourages sustainable, community-driven development.

## 4.2 The influence of servant leadership on teacher motivation in rural schools

The teachers and principals highlighted several ways in which servant leadership influences motivation among educators in rural schools. A recurring theme in their feedback was the creation of a supportive and empowering environment, along with the importance of recognition, trust, and professional development. They expressed that servant leadership practices allow them the freedom to share their ideas, experiment with new teaching methods, and participate in collaborative decision-making.

### 4.2.1 Creation of a supportive and empowering environment

The participants noted that servant leadership practices are crucial in fostering a supportive atmosphere that enhances teacher motivation. Teachers reported feeling empowered to share their ideas, experiment with new teaching methods, and actively participate in school initiatives (T1, T2, T6).

T1 shared his insights on this aspect as follows: *The environment fostered by servant leadership really empowers me to express my ideas and experiment with new teaching techniques. The mentorship programs and collaborative planning sessions not only boost my confidence but also make me feel truly supported.*

T2 also shared similar insight as follows: *I truly feel empowered by our principal's leadership. Being part of curriculum discussions and working alongside my colleagues really inspires me to keep pushing for improvement. The supportive and trusting*

*environment makes it easy for me to voice any concerns and seek help when I need it. Plus, the mentorship programs, team planning sessions, and professional learning communities (PLCs) create great opportunities for us to learn together and grow professionally.*

T5 shared the following input: *Feeling trusted and knowing that my opinions matter really motivates me to give my all. Servant leadership creates a sense of psychological safety that encourages me to try out new teaching methods. Being given the opportunity to lead committees or participate in peer learning is an amazing way for me to grow as an educator.*

This finding aligns with studies demonstrating how servant leadership fosters a supportive atmosphere, enhancing teacher autonomy, engagement, and intrinsic motivation (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck, 2011).

To this theme the principals also made valid insights. P4 had the following insight *I support teachers by encouraging them to take the lead in discussions about the curriculum and to engage in lesson studies. When they feel trusted and empowered, their enthusiasm for collaboration and improving student learning outcomes really flourishes.*

From the other side P5 shared the following insights: *Servant leadership really enhances teacher motivation by building trust and opening doors for professional development. When leadership is shared through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) or committees, teachers not only feel appreciated but also take on a sense of responsibility. The findings from P4 and P5 show that when school leaders actively promote shared leadership through discussions about the curriculum, lesson studies, and Professional Learning Communities, teachers tend to feel more trusted, empowered, and motivated. This, in turn, enhances collaboration and commitment to improving student outcomes – an approach that aligns with the principles of servant leadership, which focus on empowerment, shared responsibility, and professional development (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck, 2011).*

#### **4.1.2 Recognition, trust, and professional development, and psychological safety**

Another important theme that emerged from the teachers' responses is the crucial role of recognition, trust, and professional development in motivating them. Teachers shared that when they feel trusted and know their contributions are appreciated, it boosts their motivation and provides a sense of ownership over school activities (T3, T4, T6). Similarly, principals pointed out that practising servant leadership significantly enhances teacher motivation by fostering trust and creating a sense of psychological safety in the school environment (P1, P2, P3, P6).

T3 shared as follows: *Servant leadership truly inspires me because it makes me feel valued for my contributions. Through peer coaching and participating in subject committees, I not only learn from others but also sharpen my own skills.*

T4 had the following point to share during the discussion: *The trust that our principal has in us really motivates me to work closely with my colleagues. Leading lesson study sessions and being part of PLCs makes me feel a strong sense of ownership. This kind of empowerment truly inspires me to dive into school initiatives with enthusiasm.*

T6 shared the following input: *Feeling trusted and knowing that my opinions matter really motivates me to give my best effort. Servant leadership creates a sense of psychological safety that encourages me to try out new teaching methods. Being given the opportunity to lead committees or participate in peer learning is an amazing way for me to grow as an educator.*

Professional development opportunities, whether formal or informal, play a vital role in equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to enhance their classroom practices, particularly in the challenging environment of rural schools. This aligns with research indicating that servant leadership can boost teacher motivation by fostering relational trust, encouraging professional growth, and recognising individual contributions (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Spears, 2010).

Furthermore, the principals highlighted important aspects related to this. P2 noted during the conversation: *I motivate teachers by giving them the tools they need for professional growth that truly resonates with their passions. When there's a foundation of trust and psychological safety, teachers feel more comfortable sharing their ideas and taking risks, which really boosts collaboration and engagement.*

P1 noted: *I make it a point to empower teachers by giving them leadership roles in committees and peer learning initiatives. This approach not only fosters a sense of ownership among them but also significantly boosts their confidence.*

To this point P3 also had the following remarks: *In rural schools, servant leadership means providing emotional support and mentorship. When teachers feel listened to and backed up, their confidence grows, which boosts their motivation and dedication to teaching.*

P6's insight also was in the same line as she noted, *Creating a psychologically safe space where mistakes are viewed as opportunities for growth really encourages people to take risks and be innovative. When we support teachers through mentorship and peer coaching, it greatly boosts their motivation and engagement.*

These findings align with recent studies in rural schools in South Africa, where servant-leadership behaviours—such as listening to teachers' needs, offering support, encouraging teamwork, and recognising achievements—have been shown to boost teacher motivation and commitment (Shula, 2023). Similarly, research has demonstrated that servant-leadership qualities, including listening, empathy, empowerment, community-building, and caring, can significantly enhance teacher morale and job satisfaction, particularly in low-resource educational environments (Makirimani & Naicker, 2025).

### 4.3 Factors inhibiting teacher collaboration

Teacher collaboration in rural schools faces significant challenges due to both structural and relational hurdles. Limited resources, heavy workloads, and insufficient digital infrastructure make joint planning difficult. Additionally, interpersonal issues, such as resistance to teamwork, low trust, and inadequate training, undermine cohesion. This highlights the urgent need for professional development and supportive leadership.

#### 4.3.1 Structural and relational barriers to effective teacher collaboration

The teachers' responses highlight multiple barriers that impede effective collaboration in rural schools, revealing both structural and interpersonal challenges. Structurally, participants emphasised the lack of resources, including teaching materials, digital tools, and suitable spaces for group engagement as T1,

T6 noted: *Communication gaps present another challenge in our rural school. Teachers often feel isolated in their classrooms, and there's no regular platform for sharing ideas or feedback. The absence of digital tools and T1 shared "communication spaces makes collaboration less efficient and less frequent".*

The absence of reliable internet and collaborative platforms limits the ability of teachers to plan together or share innovative practices effectively. Moreover, time constraints emerged as a recurring issue (T2, T5), as teachers' heavy workloads and administrative duties leave little room for reflective or joint planning sessions:

*Finding suitable times for collaboration is always a challenge. Teachers have varying workloads, subjects, and personal commitments that make it tough to sync our schedules. Even when we do set up collaboration sessions, attendance can be inconsistent, which impacts the continuity and progress of our joint activities.*

Interpersonally, resistance from colleagues who prefer working independently (T3) and the lack of formal training in collaborative teaching techniques (T4) were identified as barriers that reduce the consistency and quality of teamwork.

*T3: Some prefer to work solo and are hesitant to share their ideas or teaching materials. This can create friction and slow down the progress of group initiatives. To overcome this resistance, we need to foster patience, open communication, and build trust among our staff.*

This lack of cohesion and professional guidance often leads to fragmented collaboration and low teacher morale. Communication breakdowns, especially in isolated rural settings, further exacerbate these difficulties.

*T6 noted, Communication gaps present another challenge in our rural school. Teachers often feel isolated in their classrooms, and there's no regular platform for sharing ideas or feedback. The absence of digital tools and shared communication spaces makes collaboration less efficient and less frequent.*

These findings suggest that without adequate structural support and professional development, collaboration efforts in rural schools may struggle to achieve sustainability. Research supports this by noting that limited resources, heavy workloads, and insufficient collaboration skills are among the key barriers to effective teamwork in under-resourced educational contexts (Mncube, Ajani, & Mkhasebe, 2023 and Mdodana, 2023). Additionally, fostering a culture of trust, shared leadership, and regular professional dialogue is essential for strengthening teacher collaboration in rural environments (Du Plessis & Heystek 2019).

#### **4.3.2 Professional barriers undermining teacher collaboration in rural schools**

The responses from the principals collectively reveal that efforts to enhance teacher collaboration in rural contexts are constrained by structural issues, cultural factors, and gaps in professional skills. For instance, heavy workloads, poor infrastructure, and limited access to technology, as noted by P1 and P4, make it challenging for teachers to work together consistently.

*P1 noted, Finding the right balance between teachers' workloads and collaboration time is an ongoing struggle. Many teachers are already juggling lessons, grading, and administrative tasks, so adding more collaborative sessions can sometimes lead to burnout or low engagement. It's tough to encourage teamwork without piling on more stress for the staff.*

*P4: The physical setup and infrastructure of our school also complicate collaboration. We don't have adequate meeting spaces, and our limited tech resources make virtual meetings a challenge. Sometimes, just getting everyone together in one spot is a logistical nightmare due to the distances between departments and classrooms.*

At the same time, a lack of psychological safety and trust among teachers stifles open conversations, and the mix of different personalities and generational gaps can throw a wrench in group dynamics.

*P2: the lack of psychological safety among the team is a challenge. Some teachers hold back from sharing their thoughts or ideas because they fear criticism or being misinterpreted. This reluctance stifles open conversations and diminish the quality of collaboration. Cultivating a trusting environment takes time and a steady commitment.*

Additionally, the lack of ongoing professional development and varying levels of teacher experience (P3, P6) undermine both the ability and confidence to collaborate effectively.

P3: *In rural schools, opportunities for professional development that emphasize collaboration are few and far between. Teachers seldom get training on team-based learning or co-developing curricula. Without outside support and ongoing education, it's hard to maintain meaningful collaboration that truly enhances teaching outcomes.* P6: *Uneven levels of experience as barriers to the consistent collaboration is one of the point I would highlight under this point.*

Teacher collaboration in rural schools faces significant challenges due to structural and relational barriers. Limited access to resources, digital tools, and reliable internet makes it difficult for teachers to work together effectively, while heavy workloads reduce the time available for joint planning (Opoku-Asare & Siaw, 2023). Additionally, a lack of willingness to collaborate and inadequate training can erode trust and a sense of shared purpose. This highlights the critical need for supportive leadership and ongoing professional development to foster a more collaborative environment (Mdodana, 2023; Du Plessis & Heystek, 2019).

## 5. Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study reveal that teachers and principals in rural schools possess a profound and reflective understanding of servant leadership, with an emphasis on its relational and ethical dimensions. Teachers perceive servant leadership as a practice rooted in empathy, humility, and teamwork. They noted that principals who actively listen, involve their staff in decision-making, and provide emotional support contribute to the establishment of a welcoming and trusting school environment. According to teachers, this form of leadership fosters a sense of belonging, promotes both personal and professional growth, and strengthens the collective commitment to the school's vision (Greenleaf, 1977; Eva et al., 2019). Principals echoed this sentiment, underscoring that servant leadership entails prioritising the needs of teachers and students, mentoring staff, and encouraging collaboration. Both teachers and principals concur that servant leadership transforms the traditional top-down authority model into a more participatory, relationship-focused management style, thereby enhancing school unity and overall development (van Dierendonck, 2011; Liden et al., 2014).

Moreover, servant leadership positively impacts teacher motivation by fostering supportive and empowering environments. Teachers indicated that feeling trusted and valued enabled them to express their ideas, experiment with new teaching methods, and assume leadership roles within committees and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Principals affirmed that by cultivating psychological safety, providing mentorship, and recognising contributions, they enhance teacher engagement, confidence, and professional growth (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Spears, 2010). Recognition, trust, and opportunities for development emerged as key motivators, illustrating how servant leadership aligns individual well-being with the broader objectives of the school, particularly in resource-limited rural contexts (Shula, 2023; Makirimani & Naicker, 2025).

Despite these positive effects, there remain structural and relational challenges that hinder teacher collaboration in rural schools. Issues such as limited resources, inadequate digital infrastructure, excessive workloads, and scheduling conflicts complicate joint planning efforts. Furthermore, interpersonal challenges, including reluctance to collaborate, a lack of trust, and varying levels of professional competencies, further undermine collaboration (Opoku-Asare & Siaw, 2023; Mdodana, 2023). School principals highlighted that, to genuinely foster collaboration, it is essential to address these structural issues, cultivate a sense of psychological safety, and provide ongoing professional development to build trust, unity, and collective effectiveness (Du Plessis & Heystek, 2019). These insights emphasise that while servant leadership can significantly enhance motivation and engagement, its true potential is realised when accompanied by targeted support aimed at overcoming systemic and relational barriers.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study investigates the ways in which servant leadership enhances teacher collaboration and improves the quality of education in rural South African schools. The findings indicate that servant leadership, characterised by humility, empathy, trust, and empowerment, cultivates an environment in which teachers feel valued, supported, and inspired. Both teachers and principals perceive servant leadership not merely as a management style but as a relational and ethical approach that prioritises people over authority. This leadership model promotes trust, psychological safety, and shared responsibility, which in turn strengthens teacher morale, enhances collaboration, and ultimately leads to improved learner outcomes. By emphasising service, compassion, and inclusivity, servant leaders contribute to the development of cohesive school communities where all members work collaboratively towards a shared vision.

The study further underscores that teacher collaboration serves as a critical link between servant leadership and quality education. When principals embody servant leadership, they create conditions that encourage open communication, shared decision-making, and continuous professional development. This form of collaboration enhances collective efficacy, improves instructional quality, and supports teachers' professional development. However, the research also identifies several structural and relational challenges that hinder collaboration in rural contexts, including limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, time constraints, and insufficient trust or professional training. These challenges highlight the necessity for deliberate systemic and institutional support to ensure that servant-led collaboration remains both sustainable and effective in rural schools.

Despite the positive influence of servant leadership, persistent structural and interpersonal barriers continue to limit teacher collaboration in rural schools. Challenges such as scarce resources, poor digital infrastructure, heavy workloads, and scheduling difficulties constrain joint planning. Furthermore, interpersonal issues, including reluctance to collaborate, low levels of trust, and uneven professional competencies—further undermine teamwork. Principals emphasised that meaningful collaboration necessitates addressing these systemic barriers, cultivating psychological safety, and providing ongoing professional development to foster trust, unity, and collective efficacy. Overall, the findings affirm that while servant leadership can significantly enhance teacher motivation and engagement, its full potential is realised when supplemented by targeted support aimed at overcoming structural and relational constraints.

### 6.1 Limitation of the study

The study was limited to six public secondary schools across three provinces in South Africa, which may constrain the generalisability of the findings to other provinces or educational phases. Although the sample size was appropriate for a qualitative inquiry, it nonetheless restricts the extent to which the results can be broadly representative or applied to different educational contexts.

### 6.2 The study presents the following recommendations

Based on the insights from this study, we have a few recommendations to enhance the quality of education in rural South African schools. Firstly, we need to improve leadership development by incorporating servant leadership principles into the training programmes for school principals and senior teachers. These programmes should focus on building essential skills such as empathy, active listening, empowerment, and collaboration—skills that are vital for creating supportive and engaging school environments. Next, schools should establish collaborative structures by forming Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and allocating specific time in the school schedule for joint planning, reflective discussions, and peer coaching. This way, collaboration becomes a regular and meaningful part of the school's mission for improvement. Thirdly, we should increase professional development through capacity-building workshops offered by provincial education

departments, concentrating on collaborative teaching strategies, effective communication, and conflict resolution. Ongoing professional learning helps teachers acquire the skills and confidence they need to work together, even when faced with the unique challenges of rural settings. Fourth, investing in infrastructure and digital access is essential. Policymakers should prioritise enhancing access to digital tools, reliable internet, and shared learning spaces to foster collaboration and innovative teaching methods. Lastly, it is crucial to cultivate a culture of trust and recognition. Principals should actively create psychologically safe environments where teachers feel valued, their achievements are celebrated, and mistakes are seen as opportunities to learn. By implementing these recommendations, rural schools can harness the power of servant leadership and teacher collaboration to improve educational outcomes, boost teacher motivation, and build resilient school communities.

## 7. Declarations

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