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SERVANT LEADERSHIP STYLES OF HEADTEACHERS AND PUPILS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN LAGOS STATE PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between the servant leadership style of headteachers and pupils' academic performance in public primary schools in Lagos State, Nigeria. The study was anchored on servant leadership theory. The correlational design was adopted and population of the study comprised of 1,020 public primary school headteachers and all primary six pupils in Lagos State, Nigeria. Taro Yamane was used to determine sample size of 287 headteachers and 400 primary six pupils selected through simple random sampling and disproportionate. Three research questions were raised and three null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. Two research instruments titled: 'Servant Leadership Style of Headteachers Questionnaire' (SLSHQ) and Record Observation Format' (ROF) were used for data collection. The validity of the instruments was determined by test expert and Cronbach alpha was used to determine the reliability at 0.74 and 0.72. The data collected were analysed using Pearson Product Moment correlation to test hypotheses formulated through Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 26.0. The findings of hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 showed that: a significant relationship existed between headteachers humility and pupils' academic performance in public primary schools in Lagos State, Nigeria. ($r=.584$; $N=687$; $p<0.05$); a significant relationship existed between headteachers empathy and pupils' academic performance in public primary schools in Lagos State, Nigeria. ($r=.643$; $N=687$; $p<0.05$); and a significant relationship existed servant leadership style of headteachers and pupils' academic performance in public primary schools in Lagos State, Nigeria. ($r=.613$; $N=627$; $p<0.05$). Based on the findings, the study concluded headteachers who exhibit servant leadership traits tend to achieve better academic outcomes. Therefore, it was recommended amongst others that fostering a culture of empathy, support, and shared vision, servant leadership can serve as a strategic tool for improving educational quality and pupil academic performance in public primary schools.

Keywords:
Headteacher, Empathy, Humility, Servant Leadership, and Pupil

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Introduction

Educational quality in Nigeria, especially at the primary level, remains a major concern. Many factors contribute to pupils' academic performance, including learning resources, teacher quality, infrastructural provisions, and crucially, school leadership. Leadership in schools is recognized not merely as administrative function, but as a pivotal determinant of educational outcomes (Cheta-Maclean & Ololube, 2025). Among various leadership paradigms, the servant leadership style characterized by humility, empathy, serving others first, and fostering community gaining attention for its potential to transform school culture and improve learner achievement. Servant leadership has been linked to positive outcomes in educational settings globally. According to Shittu, Shittu and Mohammed (2024), the primary school system serves as the foundation for future learning and is very important in the lives of the pupils. The goal of primary education in the National Policy on Education is to instill permanent reading and numeracy in pupils, as well as to inculcate in them a variety of basic knowledge and abilities for further educational advancement, such as correct values and morals.

However, these laudable objectives could be actualized if the leadership of primary education is effective and efficient. Leadership seems to be a systematic process by which a superior influence, persuades, convinces and inspire followers to achieve organisational goals and objectives. According to Mohammed, Shittu and Lawal (2019), leadership is an essential element in any human organization. As management is the heart of formal organization, leadership is the soul of management. The construct of servant leadership itself implies that headteachers who prioritize serving pupils' needs, empowering teachers, fostering community and ethical practices could create environments more conducive to learning. The factors typically associated with servant leadership including trust, empathy, collaboration, stewardship which enhance teacher morale, reduce absenteeism, improve teacher–student relationships, and support instructional innovation.

Statement of the Problem

In recent time, Lagos State, as Nigeria's foremost urban and educational hub, presents a complex context: schools in Lagos face challenges such as overcrowding, resource disparity, teacher shortages, and high student mobility. In such a setting, leadership approaches that emphasize caring, relationship-building, and shared responsibility may hold particular efficacy. Understanding servant leadership in this context is therefore not only theoretically relevant, but of practical policy significance. Despite numerous interventions by the Lagos State Government and stakeholders in the education sector, the academic performance of pupils in public primary schools continues to fall below expected standards. Reports of poor literacy and numeracy skills among pupils at this foundational level raise serious concerns about the effectiveness of school leadership and overall school management. While many studies have explored teacher quality, infrastructure, and curriculum as factors influencing academic outcomes, less attention has been paid to the leadership styles of headteachers particularly the servant leadership approach. Servant leadership, which emphasizes empathy, stewardship, listening, and community-building, has been shown in some global contexts to positively

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influence teacher morale, school climate, and student performance. However, its impact in the Nigerian context, especially in Lagos State's public primary schools, remains under-researched. Most existing studies in Nigeria focus on autocratic or transactional leadership styles, with minimal exploration of more human-centered models like servant leadership.

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were raised:

H_{o1}: There is no significant relationship between headteachers humility and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria.

H_{o2}: There is no significant relationship between headteachers empathy and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria.

H_{o3}: There is no significant servant leadership style of headteacher and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria.

Literature Review

This study is anchored on Robert Greenleaf's Servant Leadership Theory (1970), which emphasizes the leader's role as a servant first by prioritizing the needs of others, fostering growth, and building a community. Greenleaf's theory identifies key characteristics of servant leadership such as empathy, listening, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community all of which are essential in school leadership. In the context of Lagos State public primary schools, the headteacher, as the instructional and administrative leader, plays a pivotal role in shaping school culture, teacher effectiveness, and ultimately, pupil outcomes. Applying servant leadership theory allows for an examination of how headteachers who exhibit these servant-like traits influence academic performance by fostering a supportive, inclusive, and empowering learning environment. The theory is relevant to this study as it provides a conceptual lens to explore the behaviors and attitudes of headteachers that may contribute to positive school outcomes. It supports the hypothesis that leadership focused on service and community-building can enhance teacher morale, improve school climate, and lead to improved academic performance among pupils. By grounding the study in this theory, the research aligns with a human-centered leadership model that is increasingly important in educational reform.

In a primary school system where headteachers are key drivers of instructional quality, teacher development, and school discipline, understanding whether servant leadership contributes to better academic outcomes is crucial. The lack of empirical evidence on the relationship between servant leadership and pupils' academic performance creates a knowledge gap that hinders informed policy and leadership development. This study therefore seeks to investigate how the servant leadership style of headteachers affects the academic performance of pupils in Lagos State public primary schools, aiming to provide data-driven insights that can support leadership reforms and improve learning outcomes at the foundational level. By drawing on recent literature from 2022–2025, the study aligns with contemporary educational leadership theory. For example, Cheta-Maclean & Ololube (2025) emphasize transforming leadership in universities via resilience, fairness, compassion and courage qualities that strongly overlap with

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servant leadership ideals. Similarly, studies in Nigeria like Ajobi & Owunna (2022) show that leadership matters for job performance, indicating that leadership styles provide leverage points for improving institutional performance.

Methodology

The study adopted correlational design. population of the study comprised of 1,020 public primary school headteachers and all primary six pupils in Lagos State, Nigeria. Taro Yamane was used to determine sample size of 287 headteachers and 400 primary six pupils selected through simple random sampling and disproportionate. Three research questions were raised and three null hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance. Two research instruments titled: 'Servant Leadership Style of Headteachers Questionnaire' (SLSHQ) and Record Observation Format' (ROF) were used for data collection. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: Section A and B. Section A contained the personal information of the respondents and section B contained the 20 items structured around the research questions. Each statement is measured on a four-point modifier Likert-type-rating scale, namely: "Strongly Agree (SA)", "Agree (A)", "Strongly Disagree (SD)" and "Disagree (D)". The validity of the instruments was determined by test expert and Cronbach alpha was used to determine the reliability at 0.74 and 0.72. The data collected were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation coefficient through Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 26.0.

Testing of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One

There is no significant relationship between headteachers humility and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria.

Table 1: Pearson's correlation analysis between headteachers humility and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria.

Variables		Headteachers Humility	Pupils Academic Performance
Headteachers Humility	Pearson Correlation	1	.584**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	687	687
Pupils Academic Performance	Pearson Correlation	.584**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	687	687

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 1 indicated that there was a positive significant relationship between headteachers humility and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria (r = .584; N=687; $p<0.05$). Hence, the hypothesis which stated that there is no significant relationship between headteachers humility and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria was rejected. This implies that a significant relationship existed between headteachers humility and pupils' academic performance in public primary schools in

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Lagos State, Nigeria. This finding is in line with Ajobi and Owunna (2022) also reported a significant correlation between leadership practices and job performance among public school staff in Lagos.

Hypothesis Two

There is no significant relationship between headteachers empathy and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria.

Table 2: Pearson's correlation analysis between headteachers empathy and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria.

Variables		Headteachers Empathy	Pupils Academic Performance
Headteachers Empathy	Pearson Correlation	1	.643**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	687	687
Pupils Academic Performance	Pearson Correlation	.643**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	687	687

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 1 indicated that there was a positive significant relationship between headteachers empathy and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria (r = .584; N=687; $p<0.05$). Hence, the hypothesis which stated that there is no significant relationship between headteachers empathy and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria was rejected. This implies that a significant relationship existed between headteachers empathy and pupils' academic performance in public primary schools in Lagos State, Nigeria. This finding is in line with Georgiadis (2025) that empathetic leadership promotes teacher satisfaction and commitment factor that indirectly boost pupils' academic achievement.

Hypothesis Three

There is no significant relationship between servant leadership style of headteachers and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria.

Table 2: Pearson's correlation analysis between servant leadership style of headteachers and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State **public primary schools, Nigeria.**

Variables		Servant Leadership Style of Headteacher	Pupils Academic Performance
Servant Leadership Style of Headteacher	Pearson Correlation	1	.613**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	687	687
Pupils Academic Performance	Pearson Correlation	.613**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	687	687

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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Table 1 indicated that there was a positive significant relationship between servant leadership style of headteachers and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria (r = .584; N=687; $p<0.05$). Hence, the hypothesis which stated that there is no significant relationship between servant leadership style of headteachers and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria was rejected. This implies that a significant relationship existed between servant leadership style of headteachers and pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools, Nigeria. This finding is in line with Ejuchegahi (2023) found that headteachers' leadership styles significantly affect teacher job satisfaction in Lagos State secondary schools.

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical role that the servant leadership style of headteachers plays in enhancing pupils' academic performance in Lagos State public primary schools. Servant leadership, characterized by empathy, empowerment, stewardship, and community-building, fosters a positive school environment that motivates teachers and supports pupils' learning. Evidence from related research and preliminary findings suggest that when headteachers prioritize serving the needs of teachers and pupils, it translates into improved instructional quality and better academic outcomes. Inconclusion, servant leadership by headteachers emerges as a viable pathway to raising academic standards in Lagos State public primary schools.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Lagos State Ministry of Education should design and implement servant leadership training programs that emphasize humility for headteachers in public primary school.
2. Educational policymakers should therefore consider integrating servant leadership style with empathy for primary school headteacher in Lagos State, Nigeria.
3. Government should establish ongoing mentoring and supervisory frameworks where experienced servant leaders support new and existing headteachers. This will encourage continuous practice and reinforcement of servant leadership behaviour that positively affect teacher motivation and pupil learning.
4. Headteachers should actively create opportunities for teacher participation in decision-making and involve parents and the community in school activities.
5. Headteachers should promote humility and empathy in their administrative duty in order to enhance academic performance of pupils in Lagos State public primary school.

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