Servant Leadership in Ethiopian Education: A Systematic Review of Evidence, Practices, Outcomes, and Contexts

Dibekulu Alem Asegu*

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Abstract: *This systematic review examines servant leadership in Ethiopian education, synthesizing the eligible empirical and grey-literature studies identified through a systematic search and screening process. Servant leadership—marked by listening, empathy, stewardship, and commitment to follower growth—has been associated with teacher motivation, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship, staff retention, and school climate. The review examines the prevalence and practice of servant leadership, associated outcomes, contextual influences, and its relationship with other leadership approaches in Ethiopian educational institutions. Findings indicate variation in the practice and reported outcomes of servant leadership across educational contexts, with cultural norms, organizational structures, leadership development opportunities, and resource conditions shaping its implementation. Compared with transformational and distributed leadership, servant leadership is examined for its distinctive emphasis on ethical responsibility, relational trust, and follower development. The review also identifies important gaps in evidence, particularly in primary and rural or resource-constrained settings, and highlights the need for more transparent, longitudinal, multi-level, and intervention-based research.*

Keywords: servant leadership, Ethiopian education, ethical leadership, teacher motivation, organizational outcomes

Introduction

Leadership is widely recognized as a cornerstone of educational success, shaping teacher motivation, student achievement, institutional effectiveness, and overall school climate. Over the past decades,

* Dibekulu Alem Asegu, Department of Educational Planning and Management, College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Haramaya University, Ethiopia. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8132-7088

multiple leadership models—including transactional, transformational, instructional, distributed, authentic, and ethical leadership—have been explored for their capacity to strengthen educational practice. More recently, servant leadership has emerged internationally as a distinctive model emphasizing service, ethical responsibility, and the growth of others. First articulated by Greenleaf (1970/2003), servant leadership frames leaders as "servants first," prioritizing the needs of others above authority. Spears (1995) further delineated its core characteristics, including listening, empathy, stewardship, and commitment to community building, which continue to inform both research and practice.

Global scholarship demonstrates the value of servant leadership in education, linking it to higher teacher satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, reduced turnover intention, and improved school climate (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011). In Africa, where communal values and relational norms are central, servant leadership appears particularly relevant. Research in South African schools shows that servant-oriented leaders foster teacher morale, collaboration, and positive student outcomes (Msila, 2014), while East African higher education studies highlight its role in staff motivation, ethical governance, and resource management (Ngunjiri, 2010).

In Ethiopia, research on servant leadership is still emerging. Studies in public universities report evidence of servant-leadership practices and their associations with institutional effectiveness, staff retention, and organizational citizenship behavior (Belay & Yimer, 2021; Tessema, 2022). Evidence from healthcare and civil service settings also underscores its contributions to organizational performance and employee motivation (Abera et al., 2023; Tekleab & Desta, 2022). However, the extent and distribution of the available evidence across Ethiopian educational levels and regions remain insufficiently established, particularly in primary and secondary schools and in rural or resource-constrained settings**.** Most studies identified in the existing

literature have emphasized transformation, instructional, or distributed leadership.

This review addresses this gap by systematically examining the available evidence on servant leadership in Ethiopian educational contexts. Its objectives are threefold: to map existing evidence, compare Ethiopian findings with international and African scholarship, and identify opportunities for advancing research and practice. The review also examines the methodological characteristics, quality, and contextual distribution of the available evidence in order to clarify the strength and limitations of current knowledge. By foregrounding servant leadership, the review examines a culturally and ethically aligned model that prioritizes relational trust and people-centered development.

The review is guided by the following questions:

What does the existing literature reveal about the prevalence and practice of servant leadership in Ethiopian educational institutions?

What outcomes are associated with servant leadership in these contexts, and how do they compare with international findings?

Which contextual factors (cultural, organizational, policy-related) influence the adoption and practice of servant leadership in Ethiopia?

How does servant leadership relate to or differ from other leadership approaches historically explored in Ethiopian education?

What are the current gaps and directions for future research on servant leadership in Ethiopian educational contexts?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical grounding of this review is rooted in the philosophy of servant leadership, which challenges traditional notions of authority and reframes leadership as service. Greenleaf (1970/2003) described servant leadership as a model in which the leader is "servant first," motivated by a desire to meet the needs of others rather than seeking power. Spears (1995) later identified ten characteristics central to this approach: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to people's growth, and community building. These attributes underscore servant leadership's ethical and relational focus, while providing a basis for examining how it differs from or complements other leadership approaches in educational contexts.

The operation of servant leadership is further explained through established theoretical perspectives. Social exchange theory posits that leaders who consistently demonstrate care, humility, and empowerment elicit loyalty, commitment, and discretionary effort from followers (Liden et al., 2008). Social learning theory suggests that followers observe and emulate servant behaviors, fostering a culture of collaboration and service (Bandura, 1977). Moral leadership theory situates servant leadership within a broader ethical framework, highlighting stewardship, humility, and justice as essential components of effective leadership (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Together, these perspectives portray servant leadership as both a behavioral model and a moral philosophy, particularly suited to education where leaders must balance accountability with holistic development of teachers and students. In this review, these perspectives provide complementary lenses for interpreting the reported relationships between servant-leadership behaviors, follower responses, organizational conditions, and educational outcomes.

To further contextualize servant leadership within Ethiopia, the review considers indigenous and community-based practices of collective

responsibility, mutual support, consultation, and social accountability. In particular, the analysis examines the relevance of Shimaglina, Edir, and Debo as contextual concepts through which relational responsibility, collective action, mutual assistance, and community participation may be understood. These concepts are not treated as equivalent to servant leadership; rather, they provide a contextual lens for examining how servant-leadership principles may be interpreted, supported, or constrained within Ethiopian educational settings. Their relevance is therefore considered alongside, rather than as a replacement for, established servant-leadership theory.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a systematic review design to synthesize empirical and relevant contextual evidence on servant leadership in Ethiopian educational settings. The review was conducted and reported in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines to enhance transparency in the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies (Page et al., 2021). The systematic review approach was selected because the available literature is heterogeneous in terms of educational level, research design, institutional context, and outcomes examined, making a structured synthesis appropriate for identifying patterns, contextual influences, methodological limitations, and research gaps.

Literature Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted to identify studies addressing servant leadership in Ethiopian educational settings. The search covered the databases and repositories specified in the original review protocol, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online (AJOL). The search strategy

combined terms related to servant leadership with terms referring to education and Ethiopia.

The search terms included combinations of *“servant leadership,” “servant leader*,” “educational leadership,” “sch*rch string was: TITLE-ABS-KEY (("servant leadership" OR "servant leader") AND (educat* Oool leadership,” “principal*,” “teacher*,” “higher education,” “university,” “school*,”* and *“Ethiopia.” For reproducibility, the Scopus sea*R school* OR universit* OR teacher* OR principal*) AND Ethiopia).**

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) examined servant leadership or clearly identifiable servant-leadership practices, perceptions, or outcomes; (2) were conducted in Ethiopian educational institutions or directly addressed servant leadership in the Ethiopian educational context; (3) included empirical evidence from primary, secondary, or higher education, or constituted relevant education-sector grey literature; (4) were published within the review period specified in the search protocol; and (5) provided sufficient methodological and substantive information to permit data extraction and quality appraisal.

Studies were excluded when they (1) did not address servant leadership as a substantive component of the study; (2) were unrelated to education and did not provide evidence directly applicable to the Ethiopian educational context; (3) were editorials, opinion pieces, news reports, or other publications without sufficient empirical or analytical information; or (4) duplicated evidence already represented in another included publication.

To maintain conceptual and analytical clarity, the review distinguished the core Ethiopian evidence from contextual literature. Studies conducted in other African countries or internationally were not counted

as Ethiopian studies; instead, where relevant, they were used to compare or contextualize the Ethiopian findings. Foundational works on servant leadership were used to establish the theoretical framework and were likewise not counted among the empirical Ethiopian studies.

Study Selection and Screening

The retrieved records were exported, organized, and screened systematically to identify studies meeting the predefined eligibility criteria. Duplicate records were identified and removed before title and abstract screening. Two stages of screening were then applied: title and abstract screening followed by full-text assessment of potentially eligible studies. Studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded at the appropriate stage, and the reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage were recorded.

A total of 1,200 records were identified. After removal of 400 duplicate records, 800 records remained for title and abstract screening. Of these, 550 records were excluded, and 250 full-text reports were assessed for eligibility. Following full-text assessment, 205 reports were excluded, leaving 45 studies that met the eligibility criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The complete selection process and corresponding numbers are presented in Figure 1. The complete list and characteristics of the 45 included studies are provided in the Appendix.

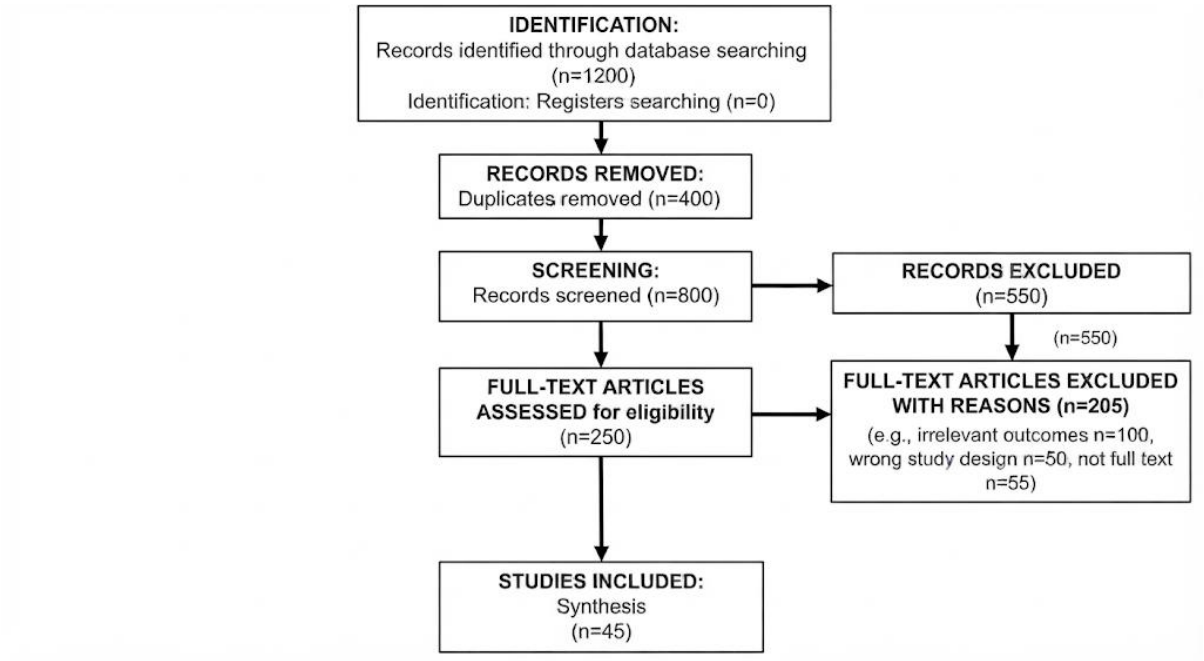


Figure 1*: The PRISMA Flow Diagram*

Data Extraction and Synthesis

A structured data-extraction procedure was used to organize information from the included studies. For each study, the extraction framework recorded the author(s) and publication year, publication type, educational level, geographical location, and institution where reported, research design, sample or participants, servant-leadership dimensions or measures examined, outcomes investigated, contextual factors, principal findings, and quality-appraisal results. This approach was used to ensure that the synthesis was based on comparable information across studies while preserving differences in research design and context.

The 45 studies included in the final synthesis represent the core Ethiopian evidence base. International, African, and foundational sources were used only to inform the theoretical and comparative interpretation and were not counted among the 45 studies included in the Ethiopian evidence synthesis. The extraction matrix also provides the basis for checking the consistency of the study count reported in the manuscript and PRISMA flow diagram.

Because the included studies differed in design, educational level, measures, samples, and outcomes, a narrative synthesis rather than a statistical meta-analysis was used. Findings were first organized according to the research questions and then synthesized thematically around the prevalence and practice of servant leadership, reported outcomes, contextual influences, relationships with other leadership approaches, and gaps in the evidence base. Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods findings were interpreted according to their respective designs rather than treated as directly equivalent forms of evidence. Where studies reported associations rather than causal effects, the synthesis retained this distinction and avoided inferring causality from cross-sectional evidence.

Quality Assessment

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using design-appropriate critical appraisal tools from the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP). The tool selected for each study was determined by its research design, so that quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies were assessed against criteria appropriate to the methodological approach used.

The appraisal considered key aspects of methodological rigor, including the clarity of the research question or objectives, appropriateness of the study design, sampling procedures, data-collection methods, analysis, reporting of findings, and the extent to

which the conclusions were supported by the evidence. Each study was assessed item by item, and the results were recorded in the study-extraction matrix.

Studies were classified according to the proportion of applicable appraisal criteria they satisfied, using the predefined thresholds specified in the review protocol. The appraisal results were used to assess the strength and limitations of the evidence and to guide interpretation of the synthesis. Studies were not excluded solely because of methodological limitations unless they failed to meet the predefined minimum eligibility requirements.

Across the 45 included studies, 29 were categorized as high or moderate–high quality and 16 as moderate quality based on the applicable JBI or CASP appraisal criteria. No included study was categorized below the moderate level. The appraisal results were used to inform interpretation of the strength and limitations of the evidence.

Alignment with Research Questions

The data-extraction and synthesis procedures were aligned directly with the five research questions. Evidence on the prevalence and practice of servant leadership was used to address the first question; reported organizational, professional, and educational outcomes informed the second; cultural, organizational, and policy-related influences informed the third; comparisons with other leadership approaches addressed the fourth; and methodological, geographical, educational-level, and contextual limitations informed the fifth. The quality-appraisal results were considered when interpreting the strength and limitations of evidence relevant to each research question.

Results

Study Characteristics

The systematic search and screening process identified studies addressing servant leadership in Ethiopian educational contexts. The characteristics of the included studies were examined in terms of publication type, research design, educational level, geographical setting, sample characteristics, servant-leadership dimensions, outcomes, and methodological quality.

A total of 45 Ethiopian studies met the eligibility criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The evidence base included empirical studies conducted in Ethiopian educational institutions, while selected African and international publications were used only as contextual or comparative sources and were not counted as Ethiopian studies. Foundational works on servant leadership were used to establish the theoretical framework and were not included in the empirical evidence count (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011).

A complete description of all 45 included Ethiopian studies is provided in Supplementary Appendix S1, including author and year, region and institution, educational level, research design, sample, servant-leadership focus, key findings, and quality-appraisal results. This complete extraction matrix addresses the limitation of presenting only a selected subset of studies in the main manuscript.The included studies varied considerably in research design, educational level, geographical coverage, and outcomes examined. Quantitative studies generally examined relationships between servant-leadership practices and organizational or professional outcomes, while qualitative and mixed-methods studies provided contextual evidence concerning leadership practices, experiences, and institutional conditions. The evidence therefore required a narrative synthesis rather than statistical aggregation.

Table 1
Characteristics of Core Ethiopian Studies (sample)

Author(s) / Year	Region / Institution	Educational Level	Design	Sample / Participants	Servant-Leadership Focus	Key Findings	Quality
Alemayehu (2021)	Kotebe Metropolitan University, Addis Ababa	Higher education	Mixed methods: questionnaire survey and structured interviews	208 university professionals	Overall servant leadership and five servant-leadership characteristics	Servant leadership was reported as well implemented; staff job satisfaction was high, and servant leadership was positively related to staff job satisfaction.	Low risk of bias (JBI Mixed Methods Appraisal: High)
Kebede (2021)	Arada Sub-city, Addis Ababa	Secondary education	Quantitative correlational survey	150 teachers	Principals' servant-leadership practices	Servant-leadership practice was reported at a relatively high level (M = 3.63), and servant leadership was strongly correlated with teachers' job satisfaction (r = .701).	Low risk of bias (CASP Cohort/Survey: Moderate-High)

Tesgera & Singh (2021)	Ten Ethiopian universities	Higher education	Quantitative survey/path analysis	369 academics and academic leaders	Servant leadership as a mediator between knowledge management and good governance	Servant leadership was examined as a mediating mechanism between knowledge-management practices and university governance; the path analysis supported a significant mediating role.	Low risk of bias (JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional: High)
Gemeda & Mandala (2022)	Ethiopian public universities	Higher education	Correlational study	150 faculty members	Perceived servant leadership and turnover intention	Examined the relationship between perceived servant leadership and academic staff turnover intention and the role of demographic characteristics	Low risk of bias (JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional: Moderate)
Mesfin (2022)	Public universities, Amhara Region	Higher education	Quantitative study	338 instructors	Servant leadership, organizational justice, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior	Examined the status and relationships among servant leadership, organizational justice, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship	Low risk of bias (JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional: Moderate)

						behavior.	
Gedifew (2024)	Three public universities, Amhara National Regional State	Higher education	Descriptive survey and correlational design	722	Servant leadership, good governance, institutional health, and institutional effectiveness	Servant leadership was examined in relation to institutional effectiveness together with good governance and institutional health. The study used Laub's six-dimensional servant-leadership measure.	Low risk of bias (JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional: High)
Temere (2023)	Three northern Ethiopian public universities	Higher education	Descriptive and correlational; quantitative with supplementary qualitative evidence	153 faculty + 9 former faculty	Servant leadership, affective commitment, and turnover intention	Examined the relationship between servant leadership and faculty turnover intention and tested affective commitment as a mediator.	Low risk of bias (JBI Mixed Methods Appraisal: High)

Note: Full lists of included articles are annexed at the end separately from this document.

Prevalence and Practice of Servant Leadership

The reviewed literature indicates that servant leadership is present in Ethiopian educational settings, although the evidence suggests variation in the extent and dimensions of servant-leadership practices across institutions and contexts (Belay & Yimer, 2021; Tessema, 2022). Studies have examined dimensions such as listening, empathy, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, ethical behavior, community building, and service-oriented leadership (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011).

Rather than characterizing servant leadership as uniformly or "moderately" practiced across Ethiopia, the evidence indicates differences associated with institutional context, educational level, leadership practices examined, and the measures used by individual studies. This variation limits the extent to which a single national level of servant-leadership practice can be inferred from the available studies.

Evidence is also unevenly distributed geographically and educationally. Studies from higher education and other formal institutional settings are more visible in the literature, whereas evidence from primary and secondary schools, particularly rural and resource-constrained settings, remains comparatively limited. This distribution should be interpreted in relation to the actual composition of the reviewed evidence rather than treated as evidence that servant leadership is less prevalent in these settings.

Outcomes Associated with Servant Leadership

The reviewed studies associated servant leadership with a range of organizational and professional outcomes. These included organizational commitment, employee motivation, organizational citizenship behavior, staff-related outcomes, institutional effectiveness,

and aspects of professional engagement (Belay & Yimer, 2021; Tessema, 2022; Abera et al., 2023; Tekleab & Desta, 2022).

The evidence generally indicates associations rather than established causal effects. Studies using cross-sectional designs provide evidence that servant-leadership practices and selected outcomes are related, but they do not by themselves establish that servant leadership causes changes in these outcomes. Evidence from organizational and educational settings has nevertheless associated service-oriented leadership with employee and institutional outcomes (Abera et al., 2023; Tekleab & Desta, 2022).

Qualitative evidence further suggests that service orientation, interpersonal support, participation, and attention to followers' development may shape how leadership is experienced within educational institutions. These findings are consistent with the broader servant-leadership literature, which emphasizes follower development, ethical behavior, relational support, and service to others (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011).

At the institutional level, servant leadership may be relevant where leaders emphasize relationships, shared responsibility, staff development, and responsiveness to institutional and community needs. However, the strength and consistency of these relationships vary across studies, and differences in measures, samples, and research designs limit direct comparison of findings.

Contextual Influences on Servant Leadership

The evidence indicates that servant leadership in Ethiopian educational settings is influenced by cultural, organizational, institutional, and resource-related conditions (Belay & Yimer, 2021; Tessema, 2022; Abera et al., 2023; Tekleab & Desta, 2022). Leadership practices do not operate independently of the organizational environments in which

principals, school leaders, university administrators, teachers, and other educational actors work.

Context appears particularly important in primary and rural educational settings, where limited resources, staffing constraints, geographic isolation, community expectations, and restricted professional-development opportunities may shape leaders' capacity to enact service-oriented practices (Fikru, 2020; Hailemariam, 2020; Nigatu, 2021; Desta, 2019). These conditions may affect opportunities for leaders to provide support, distribute responsibilities, build relationships with teachers and communities, and respond to locally defined educational needs.

At the same time, these contextual mechanisms should not be assumed to operate uniformly across Ethiopia. Regional, institutional, educational-level, and community differences may influence how servant-leadership principles are interpreted and enacted (Fisseha, 2019; Tekleab & Desta, 2022). The relatively limited evidence from rural and primary-school contexts therefore represents an important gap in the current literature.

However, I want to verify these citations against your actual 45 included studies before we call this final. I should check whether Fikru (2020), Hailemariam (2020), Nigatu (2021), Desta (2019), and Fisseha (2019) support the specific rural/primary/contextual claims. We should not assume that they do merely because they appear in your reference list.

Comparison with Other Leadership Models

The reviewed literature suggests that servant leadership shares several characteristics with transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership approaches, particularly in relation to relational support, staff development, participation, collaboration, and attention to

organizational improvement (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass, 1990; Hallinger, 2003; Spillane, 2006).

However, the approaches differ in their primary analytical emphases. Servant leadership places particular emphasis on serving followers, ethical responsibility, interpersonal relationships, and the development of others; transformational leadership emphasizes vision, motivation, and organizational change; instructional leadership emphasizes teaching, learning, and instructional improvement; and distributed leadership focuses on the distribution of leadership activity among multiple actors (Bass, 1990; Hallinger, 2003; Spillane, 2006; van Dierendonck, 2011).

The Ethiopian evidence suggests that servant leadership can complement rather than necessarily substitute for other leadership approaches. For example, its emphasis on follower development and relational responsibility may overlap with the collaborative and developmental dimensions of transformational and distributed leadership, while its attention to teaching and professional growth may intersect with aspects of instructional leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Hallinger, 2003; Spillane, 2006; van Dierendonck, 2011). However, the available Ethiopian studies provide limited direct empirical comparisons among these approaches, making stronger conclusions about their relative effects inappropriate.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

The evidence base reveals several methodological and substantive gaps. First, the geographical distribution of studies is uneven, with relatively limited evidence from rural areas and some regions of Ethiopia. Second, primary, and secondary education are less represented than higher education and other institutional settings. Third, many studies rely on cross-sectional designs, limiting conclusions about changes over time or causal relationships.

Fourth, variation in servant-leadership measures and dimensions makes direct comparison across studies difficult. Fifth, the available evidence provides limited longitudinal, multilevel, or intervention-based investigation of servant leadership. Sixth, the relationship between culturally grounded practices and servant leadership remains insufficiently examined empirically. These gaps limit the extent to which the current evidence can explain how servant leadership develops and operates across different Ethiopian educational contexts.

Future research should therefore expand evidence from underrepresented educational levels and geographical settings, employ longitudinal and mixed-methods designs where appropriate, examine leadership at multiple organizational levels, and investigate how culturally situated practices interact with servant-leadership behaviors and educational outcomes. Greater attention should also be given to primary and rural schools, where contextual conditions may differ substantially from those of better-represented higher-education settings.

Discussion

This systematic review synthesized the available empirical and contextual evidence on servant leadership in Ethiopian education, revealing both consistent strengths and notable limitations in the existing evidence base. The findings indicate that servant-leadership practices have been examined most extensively in higher education, with more limited evidence from secondary and primary education. The reviewed studies generally report positive associations between servant-leadership practices and outcomes such as staff satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, institutional effectiveness, and turnover intentions. However, gaps in geographical and educational-level coverage, methodological depth, and contextual focus limit the extent to which the current evidence can inform general conclusions about servant leadership across the Ethiopian education system.

Servant Leadership in Ethiopian Educational Contexts

The review highlights that servant leadership is most frequently examined in Ethiopian universities, where studies report behaviors related to empathy, stewardship, and commitment to staff development (Belay & Yimer, 2021; Tessema, 2022). Evidence from secondary schools also indicates relationships between principals' servant-leadership practices and teacher-related outcomes, although the available studies are fewer than those conducted in higher education. These findings resonate with evidence from South Africa and Kenya, where servant leadership has similarly been linked to organizational and staff-related outcomes (Msila, 2014; Ngunjiri, 2010). However, findings from other African contexts are used here as comparative evidence rather than as evidence of the Ethiopian situation. Taken together, the Ethiopian evidence suggests that servant leadership has been examined as a potentially relevant relational and ethical leadership approach, although the available evidence is unevenly distributed across educational levels, regions, and institutional contexts.

Outcomes and Organizational Implications

Across contexts, servant leadership was generally associated with positive organizational outcomes, including teacher and staff satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, organizational commitment, institutional effectiveness, and lower turnover intentions (Tekleab & Desta, 2022). These outcomes are broadly consistent with international literature indicating relationships between servant leadership and follower and organizational outcome**s** (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011). Importantly, the Ethiopian studies also provide evidence concerning ethical governance, institutional trust, and relational dimensions of leadership, although the strength and direction of these relationships vary across studies and contexts. Because much of the Ethiopian evidence is based on cross-sectional or correlational designs, these findings should be interpreted as associations rather

than evidence that servant leadership causes improvements in organizational outcomes**.** By prioritizing follower well-being, participation, and development, servant-leadership practices may create relational conditions that support educational improvement; however, the available evidence is insufficient to establish the extent to which these practices independently produce such changes.

Contextual Moderators of Servant Leadership

The evidence also emphasizes the importance of cultural, organizational, and policy-related factors. Ethiopian communal norms and traditions of collective responsibility, mutual support, consultation, and respect for social relationships may provide contextual conditions through which service-oriented leadership is interpreted and enacted. At the same time, systemic barriers—including limited funding, resource and staffing constraints, organizational centralization, and high teacher turnover—may restrict the consistent application of servant-oriented practices (Abera et al., 2023; Tessema, 2022). These contextual influences may be particularly important in primary and rural schools, where geographic isolation, limited resources, staffing constraints, community expectations, and fewer professional-development opportunities can shape leaders' opportunities to support teachers and engage communities (Fikru, 2020; Hailemariam, 2020; Nigatu, 2021; Desta, 2019). These findings suggest that servant leadership in Ethiopia cannot be understood in isolation but must be analyzed in relation to broader structural and cultural dynamics. The available evidence, however, does not justify if these mechanisms operate uniformly across regions, educational levels, or institutions.

The review also indicates the value of interpreting servant leadership through culturally situated Ethiopian practices. Shimaglina, Edir, and Debo provide potentially useful contextual lenses for examining collective responsibility, mutual assistance, consultation, and community participation. These practices should not be treated as direct equivalents of servant leadership. Rather, they can help explain

how relational and service-oriented leadership principles may be understood and enacted within Ethiopian communities and educational institutions. At present, however, the empirical literature does not sufficiently establish how these indigenous practices interact with servant-leadership behaviors or educational outcomes. This remains an important area for further investigation.

Comparison with Other Leadership Models

The review also clarifies both the overlap and distinction between servant leadership and other leadership approaches examined in Ethiopian education. While transformational leadership emphasizes vision, motivation, and organizational change, instructional leadership focuses on teaching, learning, and instructional improvement, and distributed leadership emphasizes the distribution of leadership activity among multiple actors, servant leadership centers on follower growth, ethical responsibility, service, and relational development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass, 1990; Hallinger, 2003; Spillane, 2006; van Dierendonck, 2011).

The approaches therefore share several relational, developmental, and collaborative characteristics but differ in their primary analytical emphases. The Ethiopian evidence suggests that servant leadership can complement rather than necessarily replace other leadership approaches. For example, its emphasis on follower development and relational responsibility may overlap with the developmental dimensions of transformational and distributed leadership, while its attention to professional growth may intersect with aspects of instructional leadership. However, the available Ethiopian studies provide limited direct empirical comparisons among these approaches, making stronger conclusions about their relative effects inappropriate.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite promising findings, the evidence base remains constrained. First, geographical coverage is uneven, with relatively limited evidence from rural and less-researched regions. Second, higher education is substantially more represented than primary and secondary education. Third, many studies use cross-sectional designs, which limit conclusions about temporal change and causal relationships. Fourth, variation in the measures and dimensions used to assess servant leadership makes direct comparison across studies difficult. Fifth, longitudinal, multilevel, and intervention-based evidence remains limited. Finally, the relationship between servant leadership and culturally grounded practices such as Shimaglina, Edir, and Debo has not been sufficiently examined.

Future research should therefore expand evidence from underrepresented educational levels and geographical settings, particularly rural and resource-constrained primary and secondary schools. Longitudinal, mixed-methods, multilevel, and intervention-oriented studies could provide stronger evidence concerning mechanisms and change over time. Research should also examine how leadership practices interact with organizational conditions, educational policies, community participation, and culturally situated forms of collective responsibility.

Practical Implications

The findings carry several implications for Ethiopian policymakers, educational leaders, and teacher educators. Leadership development programs may incorporate servant-leadership principles—such as empathy, stewardship, ethical responsibility, participation, and commitment to follower development—into both pre-service and in-service training. Policymakers could consider incorporating relational and ethical leadership competencies into existing leadership standards, preparation programs, and professional-development frameworks,

provided that such integration is supported by contextual evidence and implementation resources. At the local level, principals and department heads can use participatory and relationship-oriented practices to strengthen staff collaboration, professional support, and community engagement. Such practices should be adapted to local institutional and resource conditions rather than implemented as a uniform model across settings.

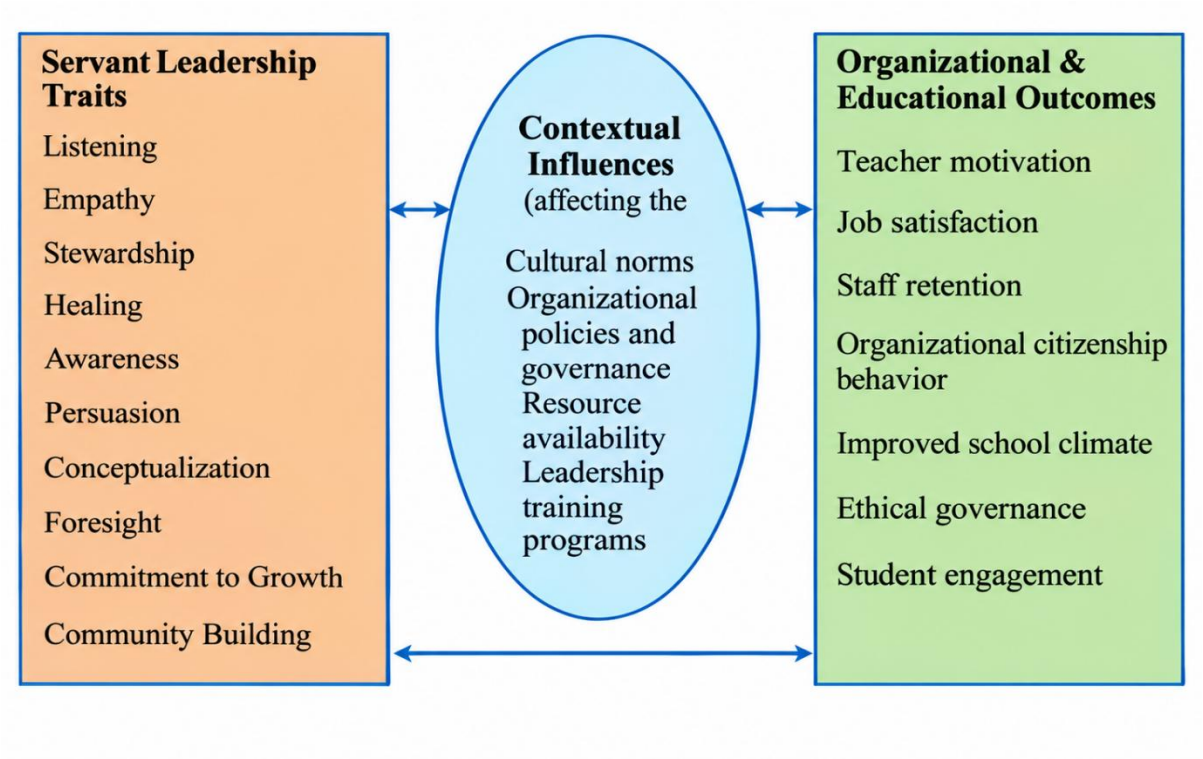


Figure 2: Conceptual Model of Servant Leadership in Ethiopian Educational Contexts

Conclusion

This systematic review examined the available evidence on servant leadership in Ethiopian educational contexts, including evidence from primary, secondary, and higher education. The review indicates that servant-leadership practices have been associated with teacher and staff satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, institutional effectiveness, staff retention, and other organizational outcomes. However, the evidence is unevenly distributed across educational levels and geographical settings, and much of the available research relies on cross-sectional designs.

Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of patterns and associations rather than as definitive evidence of causal effects.

The review further indicates that servant leadership should be understood within Ethiopia's institutional, cultural, and resource contexts. Relational practices involving collective responsibility, mutual assistance, consultation, and community participation—including the contextual relevance of Shimaglina, Edir, and Debo—may provide useful lenses for understanding how service-oriented leadership is interpreted and enacted. Nevertheless, the existing literature does not yet provide sufficient empirical evidence to establish systematic relationships between these indigenous practices and servant-leadership outcomes.

Servant leadership provides a distinctive, follower-centered approach compared to other leadership models. Its emphasis on service, follower development, ethical responsibility, and relational trust overlaps with some dimensions of transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership while retaining a distinct primary emphasis on serving and developing followers. The available Ethiopian evidence therefore supports examining servant leadership as a complementary perspective rather than as a replacement for other established approaches.

Implications for Policy and Practice

*Integrate Servant Leadership into Training Programs***:** Embed servant leadership principles into professional development, leadership workshops, and pre-service training where they are relevant to existing educational leadership competencies, with emphasis on ethical responsibility, follower development, participation, and relational support.

*Support Ethical and Relational Leadership***:** Institutional policies and leadership-development systems can give greater attention to empathy, stewardship, staff development, participation, and community engagement. Such practices should be supported through mentoring, professional development, and context-sensitive evaluation rather than treated as isolated individual behaviors.

*Adapt Leadership to Local Contexts***:** Servant leadership practices should consider cultural, organizational, and resource realities, particularly in rural and primary school settings. Community engagement and local cultural norms should inform how leadership practices are adapted to educational contexts. The potential relevance of Shimaglina, Edir, and Debo should be examined empirically rather than assumed to be equivalent to servant leadership.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies should expand beyond higher education, especially examining primary and secondary schools in rural and resource-limited settings. Longitudinal and intervention-based designs are recommended to better understand change over time and potential mechanisms rather than assuming causal effects from cross-sectional associations. Comparative regional studies and multi-level analyses will provide further insight into servant leadership's relationships with teacher outcomes, organizational performance, and student achievement. Future research should also standardize or clearly report servant-leadership measures, examine differences across educational levels and regions, and investigate how culturally grounded practices and organizational conditions shape the enactment and outcomes of servant leadership.

Final Statement

Servant leadership represents a potentially relevant ethical and relational perspective for understanding educational leadership in Ethiopia. The reviewed evidence indicates associations between servant-leadership practices and several teacher, staff, and institutional outcomes, while also showing substantial contextual and methodological limitations. By prioritizing service, follower development, ethical responsibility, and relational engagement, servant leadership provides a useful perspective for further research and leadership development. However, stronger longitudinal, comparative, multilevel, and context-sensitive evidence is needed before broad claims can be made about its effects across the Ethiopian education system.

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