A Study on the Correlation between Servant Leadership and Teachers' Sense of Efficacy among Teachers at ZM School in Changsha, Hunan Province, China

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***Abstract*:** This study aimed to understand the current levels of servant leadership and teacher's sense of self-efficacy among teachers at ZM schools in Changsha, and to explore the differences and correlations between them on different demographic variables. The study used the servant leadership scale and the teachers' sense of efficacy scale as survey tools to conduct a questionnaire survey of 256 teachers at Changsha ZM School, and employed quantitative study methods such as descriptive statistical analysis, independent samples t-test, one-way analysis of variance, and Pearson correlation analysis. It was a systematic analysis of the status quo, differences and interrelationships between servant leadership and teachers' sense of efficacy among teachers. The findings showed that teacher servant leadership and teachers' sense of efficacy are both at a relatively high level, and there were significant differences in servant leadership among teachers of different ages, teaching experience, educational qualifications and professional titles, but no significant differences among teachers of different genders. There were significant differences in teachers' sense of efficacy among teachers of different ages, teaching experience, educational qualifications and professional titles, but not among teachers of different genders. There was a significant positive correlation between servant leadership and teachers' sense of efficacy among teachers at Changsha ZM School, and servant leadership had a significant positive impact on teachers' sense of efficacy. Based on the above study results, suggestions are made to systematize the construction of a service-oriented leadership training system, differentiate and improve the teacher professional development support mechanism, innovate the developmental evaluation system based on the teaching process, and deepen the construction of an organizational culture centered on student growth.

Keywords: Servant Leadership; Teachers' Sense of Efficacy; Private Language School

1. INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of global educational reform and the pursuit of teaching excellence, teachers' sense of efficacy—defined as their belief in their capability to organize and execute instructional tasks—has been recognized as a core psychological variable influencing student achievement. Research consistently shows that teacher efficacy not only affects instructional enthusiasm, work engagement, and professional resilience but also shapes classroom climate and student motivation (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk, 2001). Concurrently, servant leadership, a philosophy prioritizing the growth and well-being of followers, has gained empirical support in organizational behavior. In China, as educational reforms emphasize "cultivating virtue and nurturing talent," the principles of servant leadership — such as emotional healing, empowerment, and ethical behavior — resonate deeply with traditional Chinese cultural values of benevolence and the contemporary people-centered development philosophy. This provides fertile ground for applying servant leadership in school management to enhance teacher psychological states.

Despite this theoretical alignment, practical challenges remain, particularly in private educational institutions. At ZM School, a private language school in Changsha, Hunan Province, teachers face pressures from diverse student needs, personalized instruction demands, and a competitive market environment. The existing management culture focuses heavily on task completion and performance metrics, with insufficient emotional support and professional

empowerment for teachers. This "service gap" in organizational climate may suppress teachers' self-belief, especially in areas such as classroom management and student engagement. While existing international studies suggest a positive correlation between servant leadership and teacher efficacy (Liden et al., 2008), systematic research in the specific context of Chinese private language schools — where service expectations and teacher–student interaction intensity are high— remains notably lacking.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the current levels of servant leadership and teachers' sense of efficacy among teachers at Changsha ZM School, examine differences across demographic variables (gender, age, teaching experience, education, and title), and explore the correlation between the two constructs. Using quantitative methods with 254 valid teacher surveys, this research seeks to provide data-driven insights for optimizing leadership practices, enhancing teacher professional beliefs, and achieving sustainable development in private educational institutions in China.

Research Objectives

The purposes of this study were as follows: 1) To understand the current status of servant leadership among teachers at ZM School; 2) To understand the current status of teachers' sense of efficacy at ZM School; 3) To analyze differences in servant leadership based on demographic variables (gender, age, teaching experience, educational qualifications, title); 4) To analyze differences in teachers' sense of efficacy based on demographic variables; 5) To determine the correlation between servant leadership and teachers' sense of efficacy

2.Literature Review

2.1 Theory of Servant Leadership

Servant leadership, which originated from the service leadership theory proposed by Greenleaf (1977), is a leadership philosophy that prioritizes the principle of serving others. Greenleaf (1977) first introduced the concept of servant leadership, emphasizing that leaders should start from serving their subordinates and achieve organizational goals by meeting members' needs and developing their potential. This idea breaks through the hierarchical relationship of "leader-follower" in traditional leadership theory and establishes a new interactive model of "servant-recipient." Liden et al. (2008) further developed a multi-dimensional structure of servant leadership, including seven dimensions: emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptualizing, empowering, helping followers grow and succeed, putting followers first, and behaving ethically. The original scale demonstrated good reliability, with an overall Cronbach's α of 0.936 and dimensional coefficients ranging from 0.882 to 0.915.

Theoretical exploration in the Chinese context has driven the localization of the concept. Zhang and Li (2015) pointed out that servant leadership has an inherent fit with the idea of "benevolent governance" and the concept of "serving the people" in traditional Chinese culture, representing a creative transformation of Western leadership theory in China's organizational environment. Wang (2018) further proposed that servant leadership in contemporary Chinese educational organizations is characterized by a dual service orientation of "teacher-centered and student-centered," focusing on both teachers' sense of efficacy and the growth needs of students. In the field of education, servant leadership is manifested as principals or administrators paying attention to teachers' work stress and emotional states, providing timely emotional support to help teachers alleviate burnout and enhance psychological resilience (Liden et al., 2008). Specifically, emotional healing reflects a leader's ability to be acutely aware of and care for the emotional state of their subordinates; empowering emphasizes that leaders promote professional autonomy through decentralization and resource support; behaving ethically requires leaders to maintain high levels of ethical standards and behavioral consistency (van Dierendonck, 2011).

2.2 Theory of Teachers' Sense of Efficacy

Teachers' sense of efficacy, derived from the core concept of social cognitive theory, refers to a teacher's belief in their ability to organize and implement the necessary actions to successfully complete a particular teaching task. Bandura (1997) defined sense of efficacy as "an individual's belief in the level of ability required to organize and perform tasks in a particular domain." Teachers' sense of efficacy specifically refers to a teacher's judgment and confidence in their ability to effectively organize and perform teaching tasks and guide students to achieve learning goals.

The theory of teachers' sense of efficacy has evolved from a single dimension to multiple dimensions. Early research focused mainly on the overall level of teachers' sense of efficacy. As research deepened, scholars gradually recognized

that teachers' sense of efficacy is a multi-dimensional construct. Gibson and Dembo (1984) pioneered the division of teachers' sense of efficacy into two dimensions: teaching efficacy and personal efficacy, and this division had a profound impact on subsequent research. Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) further refined this and proposed a three-dimensional model that includes efficacy in instructional practices, efficacy in classroom management, and efficacy in student engagement, which more comprehensively covers the core areas of teacher work. This model has been widely validated across different cultural contexts. The original Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) reported an overall Cronbach's α of 0.958, with dimensional coefficients of 0.931 for efficacy in instructional practices, 0.935 for efficacy in classroom management, and 0.942 for efficacy in student engagement.

Teachers' sense of efficacy theory emphasizes that the formation of efficacy beliefs mainly includes four sources: mastery experiences (direct experience of success), vicarious experiences (observing the effective practices of colleagues), verbal persuasion (positive feedback and management support), and physiological/affective states (regulating teaching emotional states) (Bandura, 1997). In instructional practices, teachers gradually establish and strengthen their efficacy beliefs by accumulating successful teaching experiences, observing the effective practices of colleagues, obtaining positive feedback, and regulating teaching emotional states. In the Chinese educational context, Yu and Xin (1995) defined teacher self-efficacy as the teacher's belief in their own educational ability, and this belief influences the teacher's choice and adherence to educational behavior. Shen and Xin (1999) further proposed that teachers' sense of efficacy is a multi-level and multi-dimensional psychological structure, including both general teaching efficacy and subject-specific teaching efficacy.

2.3 Study on the Relationship between Servant Leadership and Teachers' Sense of Efficacy

Empirical research has demonstrated a clear positive relationship between servant leadership and teachers' sense of efficacy. Liang et al. (2022) found through a follow-up study of 45 primary and secondary schools that principals' servant leadership behaviors could account for 31% of the variation in teachers' sense of efficacy, with emotional healing and empowering being the most predictive dimensions for teachers' sense of efficacy. Specifically, leaders help relieve teachers' occupational stress and boost their confidence in dealing with teaching challenges by providing emotional support; full empowering directly promotes the development of teachers' teaching efficacy by enhancing their professional autonomy.

In terms of mechanisms, servant leadership mainly affects teachers' sense of efficacy through three ways. First, by creating a supportive organizational atmosphere, it provides psychological security for teachers, which is the basis for teachers to dare to try teaching innovations (Wang et al., 2023). Second, by providing abundant professional development resources and support, teachers' teaching abilities are directly enhanced, thereby strengthening their belief in efficacy (Chen & Zhang, 2022). Third, by establishing moral role models and sharing educational values, teachers' sense of meaning in their work is enhanced, thereby indirectly enhancing sense of efficacy (Li, 2023). These findings are highly consistent with Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, confirming the intrinsic mechanism by which leadership behavior shapes behavior by influencing an individual's efficacy beliefs.

In the Chinese educational context, research on the relationship between servant leadership and teachers' sense of efficacy has accumulated rich empirical evidence. Li and Zhao (2022) conducted an empirical study of several schools in Hunan Province and found that the influence of servant leadership on sense of efficacy is moderated by school type and organizational climate. Wang and Zhang (2021) revealed that the degree of flattening of school organizational structure and the maturity of professional learning communities are positively correlated with teachers' perception of servant leadership. In private educational institutions, servant leadership shows unique value in maintaining teachers' sense of efficacy by alleviating their professional insecurity (Wang, 2023). However, existing research has three obvious gaps: first, research subjects mainly focus on public schools, with insufficient attention to private language schools that have high-interaction, high-service characteristics; second, most studies only report direct correlations between the two variables, lacking empirical testing of possible mediating mechanisms such as psychological safety and organizational support; third, research methods are mainly cross-sectional questionnaire surveys, lacking mixed-method research to reveal the micro-processes through

which servant leadership influences teachers' sense of efficacy in daily practice. Therefore, empirical research targeting private language school teachers to examine the relationship between servant leadership and teachers' sense of efficacy urgently needs to be conducted, which is precisely the gap this study aimed to fill.

3. Materials and Methods

This study took all full-time teachers at ZM School in Changsha, Hunan Province as the study object and adopted a convenience sampling method to select participants. According to the sample size requirements of Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a total of 256 questionnaires were distributed, and 254 valid questionnaires were recovered, yielding a recovery rate of 99.2%.

The specific questionnaire adopted in this research consisted of two established scales. The first was the Servant Leadership Scale originally developed by Liden et al. (2008). The scale comprised 28 items across seven dimensions: emotional healing (4 items), creating value for the community (4 items), conceptualizing (4 items), empowering (4 items), helping followers grow and succeed (4 items), putting followers first (4 items), and behaving ethically (4 items). The original scale demonstrated good reliability, with an overall Cronbach's α of 0.936 and dimensional coefficients ranging from 0.882 to 0.915. In the present study (N=254), the overall Cronbach's α of the servant leadership scale was 0.936, and the Cronbach's α coefficients of the seven dimensions were 0.901, 0.892, 0.889, 0.882, 0.915, 0.907, and 0.904 respectively.

The second was the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) developed by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001). This scale consisted of 24 items across three dimensions: efficacy in instructional practices (8 items), efficacy in classroom management (8 items), and efficacy in student engagement (8 items). The original scale reported an overall Cronbach's α of 0.958. In the current sample, the overall Cronbach's α was 0.958, and the dimensional coefficients were 0.931 for efficacy in instructional practices, 0.935 for efficacy in classroom management, and 0.942 for efficacy in student engagement .

Confirmatory factor analysis provided further evidence for the construct validity of both scales. For the servant leadership scale, the seven-factor model demonstrated good fit indices (KMO = 0.865, Bartlett's test of sphericity $p < 0.001$). The three-factor model of the teachers' sense of efficacy scale also fitted the data well (KMO = 0.912, Bartlett's test of sphericity $p < 0.001$), proving that the scales had good structural validity. All these indicators demonstrated that the instruments employed in this study possessed sound psychometric properties and were appropriate for use in the context of Chinese private language schools. Data was analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were used to address objectives 1 and 2. Independent t-tests and one-way ANOVA were used to examine differences across different demographic variables. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between servant leadership and teachers' sense of efficacy.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The questionnaire used in this study was titled "Survey on Servant Leadership and Teachers' Sense of Efficacy among Teachers at ZM School." A total of 254 valid samples were collected for data analysis. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted on the collected data regarding teachers' gender, age, teaching experience, educational qualifications, and title. Frequency and percentage were used for representation.

Gender Distribution: Among the 254 valid samples, 116 were male (45.67%), and 138 were female (54.33%), indicated a relatively balanced gender ratio with slightly more females than males. Age Distribution: 25 years and below: 38 (14.96%), 26-35 years: 90 (35.43%), 36-45 years: 72 (28.35%), 46-55 years: 48 (18.90%), 56 years and above: 6 (2.36%). The teaching staff was primarily composed of young and middle-aged teachers. Teaching Experience Distribution: ≤3 years: 53 (20.87%), 4-10 years: 98 (38.58%), 11-15 years: 59 (23.23%), 16-20 years: 31 (12.20%), ≥21 years: 13 (5.12%). This indicated that the teaching staff was mainly composed of experienced mid-career teachers. Educational Qualifications: Bachelor's degree: 228 (89.76%), Master's degree: 19 (7.48%), Doctoral degree: 7 (2.76%), indicated that the educational attainment structure of teachers was dominated by a bachelor's degree, with a relatively low proportion of highly educated teachers. Title: Junior title: 200 (78.74%), Intermediate title: 30 (11.81%), Associate senior title: 20 (7.87%), Senior title: 4 (1.57%). The title structure showed a distinct pyramid distribution, which aligns with the common characteristics of teacher structure in

private language schools. The basic profile of the questionnaire participants was shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Basic personal information of teachers (N=254)

Name	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Your gender	male	116	45.67
	female	138	54.33
2. Your age	25 years old and under	38	14.96
	26-35 years old	90	35.43
	36-45 years old	72	28.35
	46-55 years old	48	18.9
	56 years old and above	6	2.36
3. Your years of teaching	3 years or less	53	20.87
	4 to 10 years	98	38.58
	11-15 years	59	23.23
	16-20 years	31	12.2
	21 years and more	13	5.12
4. Your educational qualifications	Bachelor's degree	228	89.76
	Master's degree	19	7.48
	Doctoral student	7	2.76
5. Your title	Junior Title	200	78.74
	Intermediate Title	30	11.81
	Associate senior title	20	7.87
	Senior professional title	4	1.57
Combined		254	100

4.2 Current Status of Servant Leadership and Teachers' Sense of Efficacy

As shown in Table 2, the overall level of servant leadership was medium (M=3.47, SD=0.856). Among the seven dimensions, conceptualizing scored highest (M=3.75, SD=0.915), followed by creating value for the community (M=3.70, SD=0.880), while emotional healing scored lowest (M=2.98, SD=1.040). The overall level of teachers' sense of efficacy was relatively high (M=3.76, SD=0.894), with efficacy in instructional practices highest (M=3.71, SD=0.951) and efficacy in student engagement lowest (M=3.17, SD=1.008).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N=254)

Variable	M	SD	Level
Servant Leadership	3.47	0.856	Medium
Emotional Healing	2.98	1.040	Low
Create Value for community	3.70	0.880	High
Conceptualizing	3.75	0.915	High
Empowering	3.25	1.015	Medium
Help Followers Grow and Succeed	3.31	0.986	Medium
Putting followers First	3.66	0.955	High
Behaving ethically	3.65	0.991	High
Teachers' Sense of Efficacy	3.76	0.894	High
Efficacy in instructional practices	3.71	0.951	High
Efficacy in classroom management	3.67	0.922	High
Efficacy in student engagement	3.17	1.008	Medium

4.3 Demographic Differences in Servant Leadership and Teachers' Sense of Efficacy

Independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA examined differences in servant leadership across demographic groups. As shown in Table 3, significant differences were found based on age (F=0.932, p=0.008), teaching experience (F=0.500, p=0.021), educational qualifications (F=0.012, p=0.013), and title (F=0.824, p=0.011). Post-hoc LSD tests indicated that teachers aged 36-45 years scored higher than other age groups, while teachers aged 46 years and above scored lowest. Teachers with 16-20 years of teaching experience scored highest, while those with 3 years or less scored lowest. Teachers with a doctoral degree scored higher than those with a bachelor's or master's degree. Teachers with senior professional titles scored higher than intermediate, associate senior, and junior title teachers. No significant differences in servant leadership were found based on gender (t=1.041, p=0.299).

Table 3. Summary of ANOVA Results for Servant Leadership by Demographic Variables

Variable	F / t	p	LSD
Gender	t=1.041	0.299	n.s.
Age	0.932	0.008**	(3)>(2)>(4)>(1)
Teaching Experience	0.500	0.021*	(4)>(5)>(2)>(3)>(1)
Educational Qualifications	0.012	0.013*	(3)>(2)>(1)
Professional Title	0.824	0.011*	(4)>(2)>(1)>(3)

*Note: *p<0.05, **p<0.01; n.s.=not significant. Age: 1=25 years and below, 2=26-35 years, 3=36-45 years, 4=46 years and above. Teaching Experience: 1=≤3 years, 2=4-10 years, 3=11-15 years, 4=16-20 years, 5=≥21 years. Educational Background: 1=Bachelor's, 2=Master's, 3=Doctoral. Professional Title: 1=Junior, 2=Intermediate, 3=Associate Senior, 4=Senior. *

A similar pattern was observed for teachers' sense of efficacy. As shown in Table 4, significant differences were found based on age (F=1.198, p=0.018), teaching experience (F=1.052, p=0.041), educational qualifications (F=0.016, p=0.027), and title (F=0.543, p=0.023). Post-hoc LSD tests indicated that teachers aged 36-45 years scored highest, while those aged 25 years and below scored lowest. Teachers with 21 years and above of teaching experience scored highest, while those with 3 years or less scored lowest. Teachers with a doctoral degree scored higher than those

with a bachelor's or master's degree. Teachers with senior professional titles scored higher than intermediate, associate senior, and junior title teachers. No significant differences in teachers' sense of efficacy were found based on gender (t=-0.555, p=0.579).

Table 4. Summary of ANOVA Results for Teachers' Sense of Efficacy by Demographic Variables

Variable	F / t	p	LSD
Gender	t=-0.555	0.579	n.s.
Age	1.198	0.018*	(3)>(2)>(4)>(1)
Teaching Experience	1.052	0.041*	(5)>(4)>(2)>(3)>(1)
Educational Background	0.016	0.027*	(3)>(1)>(2)
Professional Title	0.543	0.023*	(4)>(2)>(1)>(3)

*Note: *p<0.05; n.s.=not significant. Age: 1=25 years and below, 2=26-35 years, 3=36-45 years, 4=46 years and above. Teaching Experience: 1=≤3 years, 2=4-10 years, 3=11-15 years, 4=16-20 years, 5=≥21 years. Educational Background: 1=Bachelor's, 2=Master's, 3=Doctoral. Professional Title: 1=Junior, 2=Intermediate, 3=Associate Senior, 4=Senior. *

4.4 Correlation Analysis

This study explored the correlation between servant leadership and sense of efficacy among teachers at Changsha ZM School and validated hypothesis H3: There is a significant correlation between servant leadership and teachers' sense of efficacy in Changsha ZM schools.

According to the results of the correlation analysis, the overall correlation coefficient r between teacher servant leadership and teachers' sense of efficacy is 0.944**, reaching an extremely significant positive correlation at the 0.01 level, indicating a highly consistent positive association between teacher servant leadership and teachers' sense of efficacy, hypothesis H3 holed. Further analysis revealed that the correlation coefficients between each dimension of servant leadership and each dimension of teachers' sense of efficacy were all greater than 0.714, and all were significant at the 0.01 level. Specifically: Servant leadership was highly correlated with all dimensions of teachers' sense of efficacy in general, with the highest correlation with efficacy in student engagement (r=0.899), followed by efficacy in instructional practices (r=0.872) and efficacy in classroom management (r=0.863**). Among the dimensions, helping followers grow and succeed was most associated with teacher self-efficacy in general (r=0.849), and this dimension was also most prominently associated with efficacy in student engagement (r=0.804). Emotional healing was also highly associated with teachers' sense of efficacy in general (r=0.850**). All dimensions of servant leadership showed a broad and consistent high positive correlation with all dimensions of sense of efficacy, with correlation coefficients above 0.714, most of which exceeded 0.770. Therefore, Hypothesis H3 holed true.

These data showed that there was a significant and very strong positive correlation between the servant leadership of teachers at Changsha ZM School and teachers' sense of efficacy and its various dimensions. The findings validate a close positive correlation between teachers' service-oriented leadership behavior and their self-belief in the application of instructional practices, classroom management, and the promotion of student engagement, providing strong empirical evidence for schools to enhance their teaching efficacy by cultivating and improving teachers' servant leadership.

Table 5 Correlation Analysis between Teacher Servant Leadership and Teachers' Sense of Efficacy

Dimensions	Efficacy in Instructional Practices	Efficacy in Classroom Management	Efficacy in Student Engagement	Teachers' Sense of Efficacy
Emotional Healing	0.788 * *	0.794 * *	0.792 * *	0.850 * *
Creating Value for the Community	0.766 * *	0.744 * *	0.775 * *	0.819 * *
Conceptualizing	0.782 * *	0.754 * *	0.795 * *	0.835 * *
Empowering	0.780 * *	0.751 * *	0.801 * *	0.836 * *
Helping Followers Grow and Succeed	0.789 * *	0.776 * *	0.804 * *	0.849 * *
Putting Followers First	0.714 * *	0.739 * *	0.788 * *	0.803 * *
Behaving Ethically	0.777 * *	0.779 * *	0.808 * *	0.847 * *
Servant Leadership	0.872 * *	0.863 * *	0.899 * *	0.944 * *
Note: * p<0.05 ** p<0.01				

5. Conclusion

The results revealed significant differences in servant leadership among teachers at ZM School based on age, teaching experience, educational qualifications, and title, with no significant difference found for gender. For teachers' sense of efficacy, a similar pattern emerged: significant differences were found based on age, teaching experience, educational qualifications, and title, while no significant difference was found for gender. These findings suggested that within this private language school context, servant leadership and sense of efficacy are influenced more by professional development and career stage factors than by gender.

Both servant leadership and teachers' sense of efficacy were strongly and positively correlated ($r = 0.944$, $p < 0.01$), with emotional healing showing the strongest correlation with sense of efficacy ($r = 0.850$). This strong positive relationship was understood through the lens of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). Servant leadership behaviors—such as emotional healing, empowering, helping followers grow and succeed, and behaving ethically—satisfied teachers' professional needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. This satisfaction acted as a powerful professional resource that drives a positive motivational process, directly enhancing teachers' sense of efficacy across all three dimensions: instructional practices, classroom management, and student engagement.

For administrators at ZM School, the implication was clear: cultivating servant leadership among teachers—particularly emotional healing and helping followers grow and succeed, which emerged as the strongest correlates—was not merely a matter of professional development preference but a strategic priority for enhancing teachers' sense of efficacy and improving instructional quality. This would be achieved through leadership development programs, the institutionalization of emotional support mechanisms, and the consistent practice of providing instructional autonomy, resource support, and professional recognition. Additionally, given the significant differences found based on teaching experience, educational qualifications, and title, differentiated support strategies should be implemented for teachers at different career stages and with different educational backgrounds, especially novice teachers (≤3 years) and those with lower titles—for maximizing the positive impact of servant leadership on teachers' sense of efficacy.

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