
Leading by Serving: How Wisconsin K–12 Administrators Navigated the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

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This mixed-methods study examines how Wisconsin public school administrators enacted servant leadership while navigating the unprecedented disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. A statewide survey was sent to 1,909 K-12 administrators, with 135 completed responses. The study utilized the 28-item Servant Leadership Questionnaire (SLQ) and open-ended questions to explore how these leaders balanced instructional continuity, student health, and staff well-being. Quantitative analyses revealed that administrators, on average, strongly exhibited servant leadership, particularly in the domains of ‘helping followers grow and succeed’, ‘emotional healing,’ and ‘putting followers first’. However, ‘behaving ethically’ and ‘creating value for the community’ were only moderately present. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data showed that core values of relational and ethical leadership drove administrators to adopt ‘serving first’ behaviors, such as being present, listening actively, and providing resources. Findings suggest that a servant leadership framework was instrumental for administrators in fostering a sense of shared purpose and emotional healing, which were critical for navigating the crisis. These insights have implications for preparing future educational leaders to manage similar large-scale disruptions.

Keywords: Servant leadership, K–12 Education, COVID-19 Pandemic, Wisconsin.

Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 forced the largest and fastest educational disruption in U. S. history. Almost overnight,

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50 million students across the country shifted from in-person schooling to emergency remote learning. For many districts, this represented not only a technological challenge but also a logistical, financial, and human challenge of unprecedented scale (US GAO, 2020; Diliberti et al., 2020). Schools were suddenly responsible for delivering instruction virtually, feeding children outside of school cafeterias, protecting the health and safety of staff and families, and providing emotional support during a period of social isolation and trauma (Hamilton, et al., 2020).

Responses were highly varied, shaped by community resources, state and local political contexts, and the availability of federal relief funds. While some districts quickly rolled out one-to-one device programs and training for teachers, others struggled with technology distribution and consistent instructional expectations. Likewise, while some communities reopened schools in fall 2020, others remained remote for more than a year, reflecting both differing local health conditions and differing political pressures (Elannani, 2023).

Although the COVID-19 pandemic began over five years ago, examining school leadership during this period remains highly relevant. The pandemic was the most significant educational disruption in recent history, and the ways in which school administrators in the United States responded continue to shape the current challenges such as student learning recovery, staff retention, and community trust. Research into servant leadership practices during the COVID-19 crisis provides enduring lessons for preparing school leaders to navigate future large-scale disruptions, whether health-related or otherwise. By documenting leadership behaviors under extreme conditions, this study offers both a historical record and a transferable framework for strengthening educational leadership in times of volatility and uncertainty (Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020).

Impact of COVID-19

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 placed unprecedented pressure on K-12 education systems across the United States. Empirical research confirms that the pandemic imposed a multifaceted burden on schools, producing widespread instructional disruption, exacerbating inequities, and intensifying both operational and emotional challenges for students, teachers, and administrators (Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020; U.S. GAO, 2020). Overnight, districts were forced to replace familiar routines with remote instruction, navigating a sudden and uneven transition that exposed the fragility of existing systems and the inequities embedded within them.

The rapid shift to online learning in spring 2020 compromised instructional time and quality nationwide. School district leaders expressed concern that learning loss had deepened, particularly in communities already affected by prior disruptions such as natural disasters (U.S. GAO, 2020). For example, students in Sonoma County, California, lost nearly 60 days of instruction during the pandemic, which was in addition to the 40 days previously lost to wildfires and power outages. Districts struggled not only with technology access and connectivity but also with the professional readiness of teachers, many of whom lacked training in remote instruction (U.S. GAO, 2020).

By fall 2020, national survey data illustrated the magnitude of unfinished learning and disengagement. Two-thirds of teachers reported that their students were less prepared for grade-level work than in previous years, and fewer than one in five said they had covered all expected curriculum content. On average, teachers reached only about 80 percent of their students regularly, and attendance rates dropped to 86 percent, well below pre-pandemic norms (Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020). These findings reflect the challenges in both academic achievement and student attendance as the pandemic persisted.

The crisis also magnified pre-existing inequities across socioeconomic and racial lines. Schools serving the highest percentages of students in poverty and students of color were the least likely to reopen for in-person instruction during fall 2020. Only 7 percent of principals in predominantly minority schools and 11 percent in high-poverty schools reported offering full in-person learning, compared to 20 percent nationally (Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020). Digital access remained a decisive factor. In these same schools, principals estimated that one in five students still lacked adequate home internet access. Teachers in these schools believed that their students were not adequately prepared for grade-level work and reported receiving minimal guidance on how to support learners with disabilities, English language learners, and students experiencing homelessness (Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020).

Beyond academics, the pandemic exacerbated the emotional and psychological toll already present in communities recovering from prior disasters. District officials reported that student mental health recovery had become as urgent as instructional recovery. In Florida, for example, the number of homeless students tripled after Hurricane Michael hit the state and remained high when COVID-19 made its impact, which put more pressure on the schools' capacity to provide counseling and social-emotional support (U.S. GAO, 2020).

Educators themselves faced escalating stress and burnout. Responding to consecutive crises left teachers and administrators physically and emotionally exhausted. Surveys revealed that 80 percent of teachers identified burnout as a major concern, and more than half reported working longer hours than before the pandemic (Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020). One in four teachers indicated they were considering leaving the profession altogether, which indicated a trend that has significant implications for public schools. Comparative studies further revealed that teachers were 40 percent more likely than healthcare workers to report symptoms of anxiety during 2020–2021, which reflected the depth of professional burnout within educational institutions (Kush et al., 2022).

Finally, analyses of district preparedness reflected how few schools were equipped for long-term closures. Before 2020, only one in five principals reported that their schools had an emergency plan for extended disruptions of instruction. Fewer than half had provided professional development for online teaching, and fewer had adopted a comprehensive learning management system (Diliberti et al., 2020). The disparities in preparedness for crises and emergencies across districts played a crucial role in determining the severity of educational disruption and the speed of recovery.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound and multifaceted impact on American schools, as documented by empirical research. The literature highlights significant negative consequences for student learning, mental health, and the well-being and retention of teachers. The abrupt shift to remote learning compounded the existing educational inequities, which are disproportionately affecting students from low-income and minority backgrounds, and particularly students with disabilities and English learners. Huck and Zhang (2021) conducted a systematic literature review highlighting the sudden shift to digital platforms and the challenges that educators faced in adapting to remote instruction. Teachers struggled with unfamiliar technology, students lacked engagement, and parents were overwhelmed by the dual demands of work and supporting home learning.

Servant Leadership

The concept of servant leadership was introduced by Greenleaf (1977) in his book, "Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness." He argued that a great leader is, first and foremost, a servant. He emphasized the leader's role as a servant first who prioritizes the growth, well-being, and development of others before personal ambition. Larry Spears (2021), former president of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, expanded on this concept by identifying ten key characteristics of servant leadership: Listening, empathy, healing, awareness,

persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Since 1977, the literature focusing on this style has grown exponentially, theoretically and empirically. Stemming from the concept of “the servant-leader is servant first,” researchers have developed models and constructs of servant leadership that propose sets of values, dispositions, and qualities of servant-leaders (Liden et al., 2008; Patterson, 2003; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011; Spears, 2021).

Contemporary reviews position servant leadership as a value-based approach that emphasizes humility, other-orientation, and stewardship, which is distinct, but overlapping, with transformational, ethical, and authentic leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011; Eva et al., 2019). One of the most consistent school-based findings links principals’ servant leadership to positive school climate. In a mixed-methods study of elementary schools, Black (2010) found significant positive correlations between principals’ servant-leadership behaviors and teachers’ perceptions of climate (e.g., collegiality and professionalism). Similar syntheses report that servant leadership fosters trust and collaboration and promotes a serving culture that diffuses through staff interactions (Liden et al., 2014; Eva et al., 2019).

Empirical research on servant leadership has shown that principals in three Catholic schools set the norms of interaction and created systems that maximized opportunities for those interactions (Ebener & O’Connell, 2010). They also provided multiple opportunities for dealing with situations and promoted collaborative leadership, leading to the building of healthy school communities (Nsiah et al., 2013). In a study of a Montessori principal, Lapiere and Caldwell (2021) reported how she was intentional about continually serving everyone and striving every day to be a more thoughtful and compassionate servant-leader. A meta-analysis of the existing empirical servant leadership research provides strong evidence for the positive effect of servant leadership on followers’ job-related outcomes, leader-related outcomes, and group-related outcomes (Zhang et al., 2019).

Across educational samples, servant leadership predicts higher teacher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and engagement. Recent quantitative work with teachers shows that principals who demonstrate humility, empowerment, and support are associated with significantly greater teacher satisfaction (Saadaoui et al., 2024). While the direct link between servant leadership and student academic achievement is less explored, a growing body of literature indicates an indirect but significant connection. Patterson (2003) argues that when servant leadership improves teacher morale and efficacy, it creates a more conducive learning environment, which can indirectly lead to better student outcomes. A more stable and positive school

climate, with a supportive and motivated staff, provides a foundation for improved student engagement and learning.

Furthermore, servant leadership can contribute to a more positive school culture for students' social and emotional well-being. A servant leader who promotes empathy, a sense of community, and ethical behavior among staff can model these values for students. This contributes to a school environment that is not only academically focused but also nurturing, supportive, and addressing the holistic needs of students (van der Hoven, 2021).

While being a robust framework with potential benefits, the implementation of servant leadership in schools faces challenges or requires at the least specific adaptation in educational contexts. Some critics, like Patterson (2003), argue that the model can be seen as soft and may not be effective in contexts requiring quick and decisive action. Others point to the difficulty of measuring the impact of a philosophy-based leadership style. Additionally, the hierarchical structures of many school districts can be a barrier to its full implementation.

Research Methods

A mixed methodology was used to explore the research study that Wisconsin public school administrators followed servant leadership approaches in dealing with the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 health emergency. The study research questions are listed below:

1. What are the school administrators' perspectives on how the pandemic impacted their leadership style?
2. To what extent did school administrators embrace the values that are associated with the servant leadership style during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How did school administrators respond to and manage the challenges that emerged both inside and outside of schools during the pandemic?

The study used the Servant Leader Behavior Questionnaire (SLQ) developed by Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson and included in their article "Servant leadership: Development of a Multidimensional Measure and Multi-Level Assessment" that appeared in 2008 in the journal *Leadership Quarterly*. The questionnaire comprises a 28-item scale survey that measures seven major dimensions of servant leadership: Conceptualizing, emotional healing, putting followers first, helping followers grow and succeed, behaving ethically, empowering, and creating value for the community. Using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, Liden and his co-authors established the multiple

dimensions of this scale and described how it is uniquely different from other leadership measures. The questionnaire's reliability was .95 in pretests with organizational samples.

In addition to the SLQ questionnaire, the researcher in this study included seven demographic items and nine qualitative questions. The seven demographic items included: (1) gender, (2) race, (3) current position, (4) years in current position, (5) years of administrative experience, (6) number of administrative roles, and (7) school district setting. The nine qualitative questions developed by the researcher were as follows:

1. What are the most important qualities that you value as a leader?
2. Do you practice servant leadership and if so, what are the advantages and disadvantages of this type of leadership?
3. What were the most difficult decisions that you made during the pandemic?
4. What achievements have you accomplished during the pandemic that you are particularly proud of?
5. What types of support did your staff need during the pandemic?
6. How did the pandemic affect the way your school operates?
7. How will your school ensure the well-being and safety of your staff in the event of an emergency crisis?
8. What models do you have in place to assess potential risks and define responses in the event of a crisis?
9. What more can you do to strengthen your leadership?

After the survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board, it was emailed to 1909 administrators from Wisconsin's 422 public school districts along with a link to an anonymous consent form. Only 207 administrators were not reached because of invalid or inactive email addresses. The final number of participants was 135, which represented a 7.9% response rate. Survey completion reminders were emailed at 2-week intervals, which helped in eventually increasing the number of participants.

Although the response rate was 7.9%, this is consistent with typical online survey research involving large populations of busy professionals, where rates between 5% and 15% are common. With 135 completed surveys, the sample provided sufficient breadth for quantitative analysis and adequate depth for qualitative insights, ensuring the data were both credible and robust for addressing the research questions.

Findings

Data from the SLQ questionnaire and demographic items were analyzed using Qualtrics Stats iQ and the responses from the qualitative questions were analyzed using Qualtrics Text iQ. Applying descriptive statistics, the gender data from demographic questions showed that the gender distribution among administrators in Wisconsin public schools is relatively balanced, with a slight majority of male administrators. These results align closely with broader national trends in educational leadership, though efforts to support gender equity in school leadership positions may still be relevant.

In terms of racial composition, the data shows a predominantly White administrative workforce, with minorities making up less than 6% collectively. This very limited racial diversity among school administrators reflects the high percentage of rural districts (nearly two-thirds) in the study and highlights a key demographic feature of Wisconsin's educational system where diversity of students and staff is more visible in urban districts and markedly absent in rural areas.

The current position data shows that a substantial majority of the respondents were serving as principals. There were few administrators with dual roles such as superintendent/principal, and a smaller number with the title of director. The nature of these positions suggests that the districts are small, with fewer positions at higher levels of leadership. The years in current position data shows that the majority (over 76%) of administrators have held their current role for 10 years or less. This indicates either a high rate of turnover or a relatively young administrative cohort. It could also reflect ongoing career progression or reassignments within districts.

In terms of years of administrative experience, this data suggests that while many administrators are relatively new to their current positions, a large proportion (over 90%) have considerable experience in administration overall. This combination of experienced personnel assuming new roles may reflect active succession planning or mobility within school districts. Considering the number of administrative positions held, most respondents have held multiple administrative positions, with 43% having held two positions and only 20.2% remaining in a single role. This suggests a career path that involves progression through various leadership roles, which can enrich experience and perspectives.

In relation to the school district settings, the predominance of administrators working in rural districts (nearly two-thirds) highlights a key demographic feature of Wisconsin's educational system. This setting likely

brings unique challenges, including geographic isolation, limited resources, and smaller school sizes, which may influence leadership practices and policy implementation.

In conclusion, this demographic data shows that administrative workforce in Wisconsin public schools is experienced, with broad exposure to various roles. Gender balance is relatively healthy, and most leaders have substantial tenure in education. However, racial diversity is very limited, and most administrators are concentrated in rural settings. This may call for targeted recruitment and development strategies to enhance representation and adapt to diverse student needs. Such professional development, mentorship, and inclusive hiring practices should be prioritized to build a leadership corps that reflects and effectively serves Wisconsin's evolving school communities.

Servant Leadership Behaviors

The scores received on the Servant Leadership Behavior Questionnaire (SLQ) indicate the degree to which the participants exhibited the seven behaviors characteristic of a servant leader (Emotional Healing, Creating Value for the Community, Conceptual Skills, Empowering, Helping Followers Grow and Succeed, Putting Followers First, and Behaving Ethically). The results are used to assess areas in which the respondents have strong servant leadership behaviors and areas in which they have opportunities to improve.

The scoring criteria used to interpret the results of the Servant Leadership Behavior Questionnaire are explained below:

- High range: A score between 23 and 28 means that the servant leadership behavior is strongly exhibited.
- Moderate range: A score between 14 and 22 means the participant exhibits this servant leadership behavior in an average way.
- Low range: A score between 8 and 13 means that this servant leadership behavior is below the average or expected degree.
- Extremely low range: A score between 0 and 7 means that the participant is not inclined to exhibit this servant leadership behavior at all.

Using the Likert-scale scoring range (from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), and averaging peer assessments across each item, the servant leadership behaviors were measured along the seven dimensions. The following are the aggregate scores:

Table 1: Servant Leadership Behavior Score

Servant Leadership Dimension	Score	Interpretation
Emotional Healing	25.07	High – Strongly exhibited
Creating Value for the Community	22.05	Moderate – Average exhibition
Conceptual Skills	24.57	High – Strongly exhibited
Empowering	23.62	High – Strongly exhibited
Helping Subordinates Grow and Succeed	25.60	High – Strongly exhibited
Putting Subordinates First	24.77	High – Strongly exhibited
Behaving Ethically	22.36	Moderate – Average exhibition

Qualitative Responses

In exploring the lived experiences of school principals during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study analyzed qualitative responses to a series of open-ended questions focusing on leadership values, decision-making, support mechanisms, and crisis preparedness. Responses reflect a dynamic interplay between servant leadership principles and adaptive leadership strategies in response to an unprecedented global crisis. The themes show how school leaders dealt with uncertainty, focused on people’s needs, and worked to keep their institutions strong. Each theme is aligned with one or more Wisconsin Administrator Standards.

Under the theme of “Relational and Ethical Leadership as Core Values,” one respondent said that “integrity and transparency are non-negotiable. They help foster trust, especially when you don’t have all the answers.” Principals in the study overwhelmingly identified integrity, empathy, transparency, and collaboration as core leadership values. These qualities reflect a relational leadership orientation that is rooted in trust and ethical conduct. Leaders saw themselves as stewards of community well-being and modeled moral responsibility during the crisis. This theme aligns with Wisconsin Administrator Standard 2 (Ethics and Professional Norms) and Standard 5 (Care and Support), reinforcing the view that effective leadership begins with moral grounding and human-centered interactions.

Representing the theme of “Embodied Servant Leadership in Action,” a principal noted that “being a servant leader means being the last to complain and the first to act. During the pandemic, that meant daily wellness check-ins and late-night phone calls.” Many respondents explicitly or implicitly practiced servant leadership, highlighting its emphasis on service,

empowerment, and empathy. Leaders described the importance of being visible and responsive to the needs of their staff and communities. Advantages noted included enhanced relational trust and team cohesion, while drawbacks included emotional burnout, boundary erosion, and the challenge of sustaining personal well-being. People appreciated stronger trust and teamwork, but also struggled with burnout, blurred boundaries, and maintaining their well-being.

In relation to the theme “Moral and Strategic Decision-Making under Pressure,” an administrator stated that “closing the school to protect families went against everything I believed as an educator, but it was the right decision.” A key issue during the pandemic was the heavy responsibility of making decisions about people’s health and safety. Leaders had to balance mandates, learning loss, and emotional well-being without having similar precedents. These high-stakes choices highlight the ethical complexity of school leadership during crises and connect with Standard 1 (Mission, Vision, and Core Values) and Standard 10 (School Improvement).

Addressing the theme of “Pride in Resilience and Innovation,” a participant in the study shared that “we launched an online academy in three weeks. It wasn’t perfect, but it saved the school year for many students.” Despite adversity, many principals expressed pride in innovative instructional practices, increased staff unity, and the development of remote learning systems. Several administrators emphasized how the pandemic accelerated changes and shifts that were long overdue. This theme aligns with Standard 4 (Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment) and Standard 6 (Professional Capacity).

In referring to teachers’ theme of “Emotional and Professional Support Needs,” a school administrator noted that “what they needed most was to be seen—not as teachers, but as people trying to survive.” Leaders in the study highlighted staff needs for emotional support, clear communication, and consistent expectations. Many took proactive steps to support staff well-being through mental health resources, flexible planning, and empathetic leadership. This reflects Standard 5 (Care and Support) and Standard 7 (Professional Community).

Under the theme of “Long-Term Changes to School Operations,” a school principal stated that “COVID forced us to reimagine the school day—there’s no going back to normal, only forward.” The research respondents reported a shift toward more flexible, technology-integrated, and student-centered systems. Adjustments to attendance policies, hybrid learning models, and social-emotional learning were commonly cited. This transformative mindset links to Standard 9 (Operations and Management) and Standard 10 (School Improvement).

In relation to the theme of “Emergency Preparedness and Risk Assessment Gaps,” one administrator said that “we had some pieces in place, but nothing comprehensive. Now we’re developing a full crisis response framework.” When asked about future crisis readiness, many respondents said that their systems were mostly improvised and stressed the need for better emergency plans, leadership training, and clearer communication. This connects to Standard 8 (Meaningful Engagement) and Standard 9.

Finally, under the theme of “Continuous Growth and Leadership Reflection,” a school leader stated that “I learned I have more to learn. Leading through trauma means growing through it too.” In response to how they could strengthen their leadership, principals expressed a desire for greater self-awareness, professional development, and structured mentorship. This theme supports Standard 6 and Standard 11 (Teacher Standards).

Analysis

The data indicate that most servant leadership dimensions are strongly exhibited among the respondents, with scores ranging from 23.62 to 25.60 in five of the seven categories. This suggests a general strength in practicing servant leadership traits such as Emotional Healing, Empowerment, Conceptual Skills, and Putting Followers First. Notably, "Helping Followers Grow and Succeed" received the highest rating (25.60), affirming that leaders prioritized the development of others as central to their leadership identity. These findings reflect the work of van Dierendonck (2011), Eva et al. (2019), and Zhang et al. (2019), who concluded that servant leaders emphasize empathy, individualized support, and staff development, which are behaviors that are essential for navigating organizational crises.

Principals’ ethics are reflected through the 'Behaving Ethically' dimension, which scored an average of 21.84. While this falls within the moderate-high range, it suggests that there is opportunity to further enhance ethical leadership practices, ensuring transparency, fairness, and integrity in school decision-making processes. Principals’ decision-making is reflected in 'Conceptual Skills' (23.17) and 'Empowering' (22.71). They demonstrated high levels of strategic thinking and near-high performance in empowering their staff, which highlighted their ability to envision, plan, and involve others in shared leadership. The relatively high scores on Conceptual Skills suggest that leaders demonstrated strong problem-solving and strategic thinking. Research shows that these skills are indispensable during turbulent conditions (Hamilton et al., 2020). These findings support the work of Ebener and O’Connell (2010), who found that servant-leaders are effective during crises because they focus on long-term organizational health rather than short-term control.

'Creating Value for the Community' received the lowest score (22.05), preceded by 'Behaving Ethically' (22.36) although still within the moderate range. This indicates a need to focus on strengthening community-school partnerships, improving outreach, and increasing the visibility of school leadership in broader societal contexts. Scores were highest in the domains reflecting support for staff: 'Helping Followers Grow and Succeed' (23.39), 'Putting Followers First' (23.25), and 'Emotional Healing' (23.37). These results demonstrate that principals were deeply committed to the growth, well-being, and professional development of their teams as reported in previous research studies (Zhang et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011; Eva et al., 2019).

The data indicates a strong presence of servant leadership among school principals, particularly in domains that emphasize empathy, support, and staff development. The consistency in high scores across these internal-facing categories points to a leadership style rooted in service and relational trust. The analysis also demonstrates that leaders assessed in the study generally embody strong servant leadership qualities, especially in terms of emotional awareness, empowerment, and prioritizing subordinates' well-being, which corroborates the findings in van der Hoven (2021) and Blake (2010).

However, the dimensions "Creating Value for the Community" (22.05) and "Behaving Ethically" (22.36) fell into the moderate range. These scores may be attributed to contextual factors such as policy constraints, crisis management during the pandemic, or limited engagement structures with external communities. Although these scores are close to the high range threshold, they suggest a disconnect between internal leadership strengths and external engagement. They also suggest that they are areas where leadership behavior could be more consistently demonstrated or more visibly articulated. Future leadership training might benefit from a focus on ethical decision-making frameworks and community engagement strategies, ensuring that leaders not only guide their immediate teams effectively but also extend their impact to broader organizational and societal contexts.

Additionally, qualitative responses suggest that school leaders still viewed ethical decision-making and transparency as essential, in line with Greenleaf's (1977) philosophy of leadership grounded in moral responsibility. The conflict between ethical professional behavior and the mounting pressures from within districts (e.g., staffing shortages) and outside political demands reflect similar findings from recent pandemic research showing that school administrators were routinely forced to balance ethical obligations against structural considerations (Elannani, 2023).

The emphasis that school administrators placed on collaboration and shared leadership mirrors findings from Nsiah and Walker (2013), who concluded that servant-leaders create school cultures where leadership is distributed and community-oriented. This collaborative approach was evident in this study's qualitative responses describing teamwork, shared decision-making, and joint problem-solving as essential coping strategies during the pandemic.

Overall, principals in the study exhibited a servant leadership style that prioritizes ethical conduct, staff empowerment, and personal growth as documented in other research studies (Saadaoui et al., 2024; Ebener & O'Connell, 2010; and Nsiah et al., 2013). Strengthening community engagement and making ethical leadership more visible remain areas for future growth. These findings reinforce the importance of continued professional development, reflection, and institutional support to fully integrate servant leadership across all domains of school leadership.

The findings from this study reveal that school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic embodied servant leadership while navigating unprecedented ethical, operational, and emotional challenges. Their reflections suggest a redefinition of a school leadership style that values relational trust, adaptive innovation, and collective care. These insights offer a powerful lens for preparing and supporting leaders to guide schools through future crises with resilience, equity, and purpose.

Recommendations and Implications

Grounded in the study's findings, the following recommendations target policy, preparation, and practice to strengthen crisis-ready, servant-oriented leadership:

1. **Broaden Representation:** Include teachers, staff, students, and families in future research to triangulate findings and strengthen external validity.
2. **Leadership Development:** Integrate servant-leadership competencies (empathy, empowerment, ethical decision-making) into administrator preparation and ongoing professional learning.
3. **Well-Being Supports:** Establish systemic supports (e.g., counseling, peer networks, wellness programs) to safeguard administrator resilience and mitigate burnout during prolonged crises.
4. **Community Engagement:** Build school–community partnerships and provide training that elevates the “Creating Value for the Community” dimension beyond the school walls.

5. **Policy and Standards:** Explicitly incorporate servant-leadership values into Wisconsin Administrator Standards and district leadership frameworks.
6. **Crisis Preparedness:** Invest in scenario-based training, clear communication protocols, and comprehensive emergency response frameworks.
7. **Data and Equity:** Collect disaggregated data to monitor equity impacts of crisis responses and to inform targeted interventions for underserved groups.

Limitations

This study provides valuable insights into Wisconsin school leaders' enactment of servant leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, several limitations warrant caution in interpreting the findings. First, the study's geographic focus on Wisconsin reduces the generalizability of results to other states or national contexts. Second, the sample slightly overrepresents principals from rural districts, limiting applicability to urban and suburban systems. Third, the 7.9% response rate raises the possibility of nonresponse bias; administrators less aligned with servant leadership principles may be underrepresented. Fourth, reliance on self-report measures introduces the potential for social desirability bias. Finally, the small sample sizes for underrepresented subgroups (e.g., leaders from minority groups) restrict comparative analysis across demographic categories.

Despite these limitations, the study provides an important window into crisis-era leadership and offers a foundation for future, larger-scale investigations. Moreover, by documenting how leaders applied servant leadership principles under conditions of extreme disruption, the study contributes unique historical and practical insights. It highlights lessons that remain relevant for ongoing challenges such as recovery from learning loss, staff retention, and community trust. In this way, the findings not only capture the lived experiences of Wisconsin public school leaders during COVID-19 but also offer a transferable framework for cultivating resilient, ethical, and people-centered leadership in times of uncertainty.

Participant Consent: The authors confirm that Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was duly maintained.

Data Fabrication/Falsification Statement: The author(s) declare that no data have been fabricated, falsified, or manipulated in this study.

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