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Collectivism-Based Servant Leadership in Indonesian Schools: A Qualitative Case Study of Humanistic Principal Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Rigid bureaucratic cultures in schools may weaken teachers' professional agency and emotional well-being. This study examines how servant leadership practiced by a school principal contributes to a humanistic work environment in an Indonesian junior secondary school. Using a descriptive qualitative design, the study was conducted at SMP Negeri 3 Waru Sidoarjo, East Java, from July to December 2025. Data was collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation involving 12 participants: one principal, one vice-principal, and ten senior teachers. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings show that active listening, humility, emotional support, and participatory problem-solving helped reduce hierarchical distance, strengthen teachers perceived psychological safety, and encourage more open communication in responding to administrative and curriculum-related challenges. This study proposes the Collectivism-Based Servant Leadership Model, or KPBK, by integrating servant leadership with gotong royong, musyawarah, and Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha. It also identifies Double-Loop Empowerment as a qualitative mechanism linking principal support, teacher empowerment, and humanistic teacher-student interaction. The findings suggest that school reform requires not only policy mandates and technical training, but also humanistic human resource governance.

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Introduction

Dehumanization in schools, particularly when shaped by rigid, hierarchical, and compliance-oriented bureaucratic cultures, remains a critical challenge for educational transformation in Indonesia. In a rapidly changing educational landscape, schools are expected to demonstrate professionalism, adaptability, and continuous improvement. However, human resource governance in many schools is still frequently dominated by performative routines, administrative compliance, and paternalistic patterns of interaction. In such a mechanistic environment, teachers may be positioned primarily as implementers of policy rather than as professional subjects whose emotional well-being, pedagogical agency, and personal growth require institutional support. Principals, consequently, are often perceived more as bureaucratic managers than as leaders who cultivate trust, empathy, and professional empowerment. This condition risks weakening teachers' intrinsic motivation, increasing work-related stress, and reducing their capacity to participate meaningfully in school reform. Previous studies have shown that neglecting the socio-emotional dimension of the workplace may contribute to teacher burnout, declining commitment, and reduced quality of learning processes (Wardani, 2022). Therefore, transforming schools into productive and humane learning ecosystems requires a re-examination of human resource management and interpersonal governance practices in educational institutions (Parris & Peachey, 2013).

Although instructional and transformational leadership models have long dominated discussions of school management (Setyowati & Madura, 2021), these approaches do not always adequately explain how school leaders build emotionally supportive, dialogic, and humanistic work environments. In some contexts, leadership practices that emphasize targets, supervision, and structural accountability may unintentionally reinforce top-down relationships and limit teachers' sense of psychological safety. Transactional and hierarchical practices may also generate resistance among practitioners, particularly when reform agendas are experienced as administrative burdens rather than shared professional commitments (Wahyuni, 2022). This indicates a continuing gap in educational administration studies. Much of the existing literature on school reform still emphasizes quantitative accountability, infrastructure readiness, policy implementation, and curriculum adjustment, while giving less attention to how humanistic leadership practices shape teachers' work experience and professional agency. At the same time, studies on servant leadership have been widely developed in organizational and corporate settings, particularly in Western contexts (Eva et al., 2019), but its contextual operationalization as a humanistic human resource management strategy in Indonesian schools remains underexplored.

To address this gap, this study examines servant leadership in relation to Indonesian collectivist values and local educational philosophy. Greenleaf's servant leadership theory emphasizes the leader's responsibility to prioritize the growth, well-being, autonomy, and dignity of followers before institutional authority or personal power

(Greenleaf, 2002). In the Indonesian school context, this orientation resonates with the cultural value of gotong royong and Ki Hajar Dewantara's educational philosophy, particularly *Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha*, *Ing Madya Mangun Karsa*, and *Tut Wuri Handayani*. These values highlight moral examples, collective responsibility, participatory guidance, and supportive leadership. By bringing servant leadership into dialogue with these indigenous values, this study proposes the Collectivism-Based Servant Leadership Model, hereafter referred to as KPBK. Rather than treating servant leadership merely as an imported Western concept, this study situates it within the moral and cultural grammar of Indonesian education.

Within this framework, principals are understood not only as administrators but also as culture builders who balance professional responsibility with humanistic relationships (Northouse, 2021). Servant leadership practices such as active listening, humility, empathy, emotional support, and participatory decision-making may help reduce hierarchical distance and create a safer professional climate for teachers. In this sense, a humanistic work environment is not positioned as an alternative to school professionalism, but as one of its necessary foundations. Teachers who feel respected, heard, and supported are more likely to engage in collaborative work, pedagogical reflection, and adaptive responses to curriculum reform. However, these relationships need to be examined empirically and contextually, especially in schools that operate within strong bureaucratic and regulatory structures.

This study is therefore positioned as a qualitative investigation of servant leadership as a humanistic human resource management strategy in an Indonesian school context. It does not seek to generalize a universal model for all schools, but to explore how the KPBK model is practiced, interpreted, and experienced within a specific institutional setting. This study examines how the principal's servant leadership practices contribute to a humanistic work environment and how these practices are perceived by teachers in relation to professional trust, collaboration, emotional support, and curriculum adaptation. The study also introduces the concept of Double-Loop Empowerment to describe how support from school leaders may first empower teachers professionally and emotionally and then be reproduced by teachers in their interactions with students. Through this focus, the article contributes to educational management literature by showing how school transformation may depend not only on structural reform, policy mandates, or administrative systems, but also on the quality of human relationships that shape everyday educational practice.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to examine the practice of servant leadership in its natural school context. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand leadership practices, interpersonal relationships, and teachers' experiences through participants' meanings, narratives, and

observed interactions. As stated by Moleong (2017), qualitative research produces descriptive data in the form of spoken and written words as well as observable behavior. The fieldwork was conducted from July to December 2025 at SMP Negeri 3 Waru Sidoarjo, East Java, Indonesia. The school was selected purposively because it had been involved in the national Guru Penggerak program and was regarded by local stakeholders as having developed more dialogic and humanistic patterns of school leadership. Participants were selected using purposive sampling and consisted of 12 informants: one school principal, one vice-principal, and ten senior teachers with a minimum working tenure of five years. The principal and vice-principal were included because of their strategic roles in school management and human resource governance, while senior teachers were selected because they could provide reflective accounts of leadership practices, work climate, and professional interaction over time. To protect participants' identities, the principal was coded as KS, while teacher participants were coded as G1, G2, G3, and so forth.

Data was collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Participant observation was conducted to examine daily school routines, informal interactions, staff communication, and leadership practices, including morning greetings, informal reflection, and teacher meetings. Semi-structured interviews explored participants' perceptions of the principal's leadership practices, emotional support, communication patterns, professional trust, collaboration, and responses to curriculum implementation. Documentation studies examined relevant school documents, policy records, meeting notes, reflection journals, and administrative materials related to teacher development and school leadership practices. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, which was identified when interviews with the eleventh and twelfth participants no longer produced substantially new themes, categories, or insights related to servant leadership practices, the humanistic work environment, and the proposed KPBK model. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Interview transcripts, field notes, and documents were read repeatedly to identify meaningful units related to servant leadership, emotional support, active listening, participatory decision-making, gotong royong, professional trust, and teacher empowerment. These units were then coded, grouped into broader categories, and organized into thematic displays to compare patterns across participants and data sources. Conclusions were drawn by interpreting the relationships among themes and linking them to the conceptual focus of the study, particularly the Collectivism-Based Servant Leadership Model (KPBK) and the Double-Loop Empowerment mechanism.

The credibility and ethical integrity of the study were maintained through source triangulation, technique triangulation, analytic caution, and confidentiality procedures. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from the principal, vice-principal, and teachers, while technique triangulation compared interview data with

observation notes and school documents. Emerging interpretations were checked against recurring patterns in the data to avoid relying on isolated statements, and the researchers distinguished participants' perceptions, observed practices, and conceptual interpretations because the study did not aim to measure causal effects statistically, but to describe and interpret how servant leadership was practiced and experienced in a specific school context. Ethical considerations were addressed by informing participants about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the use of anonymized codes in reporting the findings. Participants' statements were used only for academic purposes, and identifying information was minimized to protect confidentiality.

Result

The fieldwork at SMP Negeri 3 Waru Sidoarjo revealed that servant leadership was reflected in changes in the interaction patterns between the principal and teachers. The most visible change was the shift from a predominantly hierarchical and directive relationship toward a more dialogic and supportive form of school leadership. Instead of relying mainly on formal instructions, the principal developed communication spaces that enabled teachers to express pedagogical concerns, administrative difficulties, and emotional pressures more openly. These practices were consistent with the core characteristics of servant leadership, such as empathy, active listening, stewardship, and commitment to human growth (Spears, 2010). In this school context, servant leadership was not practiced as a separate managerial program, but was embedded in everyday routines, informal communication, and collective problem-solving.

One important finding was the role of active listening and humility in reducing hierarchical distance between the principal and teachers. Teachers perceived that the principal's willingness to listen before making decisions created a safer communication climate. This was particularly important because teachers often experienced school policy changes as administrative demands that had to be implemented without sufficient dialogue. In this study, the principal's open-door policy and weekly reflection activities provided a space for teachers to discuss classroom problems, curriculum implementation, and professional challenges without fear of punitive evaluation. A senior teacher, coded as Participant G1, described this change as follows:

> "In the past, every change in school policy felt like a top-down order that we had to swallow whole, and that made us anxious. But now, the principal regularly invites us to sit down for casual afternoon chats. He actively listens to our challenges in managing the classroom before making decisions. This makes us feel safe and truly empowered to teach."

This statement indicates that servant leadership practices were experienced by teachers not merely as interpersonal kindness, but as a mechanism that changed how authority was exercised in the school. The principal's listening practice helped transform decision-making from one-way instruction into a more participatory process. In the

Indonesian context, this pattern also reflected the spirit of Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha, in which leadership is demonstrated through moral example and relational closeness rather than distant command (Suryadi, 2021; Hidayat, 2020; Mulyasa, 2020).

Another finding concerned the emergence of humanistic routines that strengthened emotional support in the workplace. One example was the “Morning Greeting and Coffee Reflection” practice, in which the principal interacted informally with teachers before formal school activities began. Rather than remaining in the administration room, the principal greeted teachers, asked about their personal and professional conditions, and used informal moments to identify possible sources of stress. These everyday interactions were perceived as meaningful because they allowed teachers to feel recognized as persons, not only as employees responsible for administrative and instructional targets. This finding supports the view that humanistic leadership can strengthen teacher dedication and extra-role behavior when teachers experience compassion and professional recognition in their workplace (Suryadi, 2021; Sulasmi, 2020).

The principal, coded as Participant KS, explicitly connected this leadership practice with the value of gotong royong in school management. In his reflection, he stated:

> "I believe my role is not to be a boss who orders from behind a desk, but rather to serve the teachers' needs. If teachers are stressed by administration, the students will suffer. By actively listening and absorbing their professional anxieties, we solve problems together. This is the manifestation of our mutual cooperation in school management."

This statement shows that the principal interpreted servant leadership through a collectivist moral framework. The leadership role was not understood as the exercise of individual authority alone, but as a responsibility to maintain collective well-being and shared accountability. The value of gotong royong gave local legitimacy to servant leadership practices by framing leadership as service, mutual support, and shared responsibility. In this respect, servant leadership at SMP Negeri 3 Waru Sidoarjo did not simply reproduce a Western leadership model, but was contextualized through Indonesian cultural values and educational philosophy.

The qualitative patterns identified from interviews, observation, and documentation are summarized in Table 1. The table does not present quantitative before-and-after measurement, but rather describes recurring patterns of work environment change associated with KPBK practices as perceived and observed during the study.

Table 1. Qualitative Patterns of Work Environment Change Associated with KPBK Practices

Dimension	Conventional pattern perceived by teachers	KPBK-based leadership practice	Observed qualitative implication
Communication	Formal, rigid, and top-down	Dialogic and open communication through informal reflection and listening spaces	Teachers expressed concerns more openly and perceived greater psychological safety
Task orientation	Administrative compliance and completion of formal obligations	Empowerment of teacher potential through support, dialogue, and shared responsibility	Teachers showed greater willingness to discuss pedagogical problems and curriculum adaptation
Error perception	Mistakes viewed as violations or signs of weak performance	Mistakes treated as learning opportunities and collective issues to be solved	Teachers perceived lower anxiety in communicating classroom and administrative challenges
Work climate	Individualized work patterns and hierarchical distance	Collaborative and supportive work culture based on gotong royong	Stronger collective problem-solving and professional trust among school members

The findings also suggest that servant leadership functioned as an administrative buffer for teachers. Teachers perceived that the principal helped mediate external regulatory pressures, particularly those related to administrative reporting and curriculum implementation. Instead of transferring pressure directly to teachers, the principal attempted to translate policy demands into manageable collective tasks. This reduced the sense of isolation among teachers and encouraged them to discuss difficulties more openly. Such a pattern is consistent with the idea that servant leadership is effective in human-centered organizations because it shifts leadership from controlling subordinates to enabling their professional growth (Northouse, 2021; Greenleaf, 2018). However, in this study, the effect should be understood as teachers' perceived reduction of work-related anxiety rather than as a statistically measured decrease in burnout or turnover.

The KPBK model emerged from the interaction between servant leadership principles and Indonesian collectivist values. The model was reflected in three interrelated practices: listening-based leadership, collective problem-solving, and emotionally supportive human resource governance. Through these practices, teachers experienced a more humanistic work environment characterized by trust, openness, and collaborative responsibility. This condition provided the basis for what this study refers to as Double-Loop Empowerment. The first loop occurred when the principal's support strengthened teachers' emotional security and professional confidence. The second loop appeared when teachers were encouraged to reproduce supportive and empathetic practices in

their interactions with students. Therefore, the Double-Loop Empowerment mechanism should be understood as a qualitative pattern of relational influence rather than as a causal model that has been statistically tested.

In relation to curriculum implementation, the findings indicate that a humanistic work environment helped teachers respond to the Merdeka Curriculum with greater openness and willingness to adapt. Teachers' readiness to innovate was shaped not only by technical training or administrative instructions, but also by whether they felt safe to experiment, discuss mistakes, and seek support. When leadership was practiced through persuasion rather than coercion, teachers were more likely to interpret curriculum change as a shared professional process rather than as an imposed bureaucratic obligation. This finding strengthens the argument that curriculum reform requires not only structural readiness, but also humanistic governance of school human resources. In the context of SMP Negeri 3 Waru Sidoarjo, KPBK provided a culturally grounded leadership framework for supporting teacher agency, collaboration, and emotional readiness in facing educational change.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that servant leadership at SMP Negeri 3 Waru Sidoarjo was not merely expressed through individual kindness or informal interpersonal warmth, but through a pattern of humanistic human resource governance. The principal's practices of active listening, humility, emotional support, and participatory problem-solving created a work climate in which teachers perceived themselves as being heard, respected, and professionally supported. This finding is consistent with servant leadership theory, which emphasizes the leader's responsibility to prioritize followers' growth, dignity, and well-being (Greenleaf, 2018; Northouse, 2021). However, the contribution of this study lies in showing how these principles are interpreted within the Indonesian school context through collectivist values such as gotong royong and the educational philosophy of Ki Hajar Dewantara. In this context, servant leadership gains legitimacy not only because it is effective as a leadership style, but also because it resonates with local moral expectations of leadership as service, example, and collective responsibility.

The KPBK model proposed in this study can therefore be understood as a contextualized framework rather than a universal leadership formula. It does not replace existing servant leadership theory but reframes it through Indonesian cultural and educational values. The practices observed in the school suggest that humanistic leadership becomes more meaningful when it is embedded in everyday routines, such as informal reflection, dialogic communication, and collective problem-solving. This interpretation supports previous arguments that servant leadership is particularly relevant in human-centered organizations, including schools, where trust, emotional security, and professional relationships strongly shape organizational performance

(Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015; Eva et al., 2019). In contrast to conventional bureaucratic leadership, which often emphasizes compliance, reporting, and hierarchical control, KPBK emphasizes relational authority, moral example, and shared responsibility as the basis of school improvement.

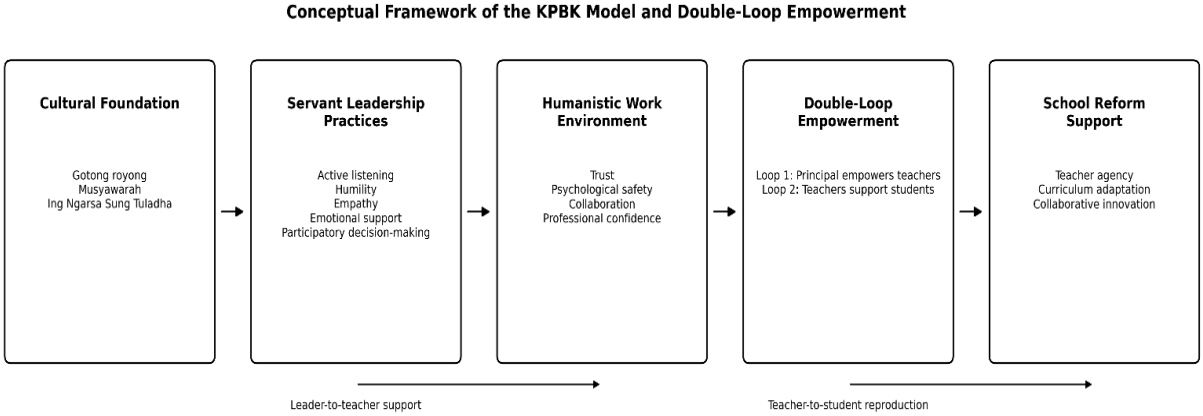


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Collectivism-Based Servant Leadership Model and Double-Loop Empowerment

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 illustrates that KPBK is built through the interaction between local cultural values and servant leadership practices. Gotong royong, musyawarah, and Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha provide the moral foundation for leadership as service and collective responsibility. These values are translated into concrete leadership practices, including active listening, humility, empathy, emotional support, and participatory decision-making. When these practices are consistently enacted, they contribute to a humanistic work environment characterized by trust, psychological safety, collaboration, and professional confidence. This work environment then enables a Double-Loop Empowerment process, in which the principal first empowers teachers emotionally and professionally, and teachers subsequently reproduce similar humanistic support in their interactions with students. In this way, KPBK links leadership practice, teacher empowerment, and school reform support within a culturally grounded framework.

A central conceptual implication of the findings is the emergence of Double-Loop Empowerment. The first loop occurs when the principal provides emotional and professional support to teachers, thereby strengthening their sense of safety, confidence, and willingness to communicate openly. The second loop occurs when teachers who experience supportive leadership are encouraged to reproduce similar humanistic practices in their interactions with students. This pattern is consistent with the idea of Humanistic Reciprocity, in which care and support received at the organizational level are reflected in pedagogical relationships at the classroom level. Nevertheless, this mechanism should not be interpreted as a statistically verified causal pathway. Rather, it should be understood as a qualitative pattern identified from participants' narratives, observed routines, and school-level interaction practices. This distinction is important

because the study does not measure student outcomes, teacher burnout, or performance indicators quantitatively.

The findings also provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between leadership and curriculum reform. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires teachers to be adaptive, reflective, and willing to experiment with student-centered learning practices. However, such professional agency is difficult to develop in a school climate dominated by fear, administrative pressure, and one-way instruction. The case of SMP Negeri 3 Waru Sidoarjo suggests that servant leadership can function as an administrative buffer by helping teachers interpret policy demands as collective professional tasks rather than as isolated individual burdens. This supports Wardani's (2022) argument that ignoring the socio-emotional dimension of school work may contribute to teacher stress and reduced professional commitment. In this study, the principal's role was important not because he eliminated administrative demands, but because he mediated them through dialogue, emotional support, and collective responsibility.

The discussion also highlights the need to rethink human resource management in schools. Humanistic HRM should not be treated as a soft or supplementary aspect of school management. Instead, it is closely connected to teachers' professional motivation, collaboration, and readiness to participate in school reform. The findings suggest that school leadership based solely on supervision, target achievement, and documentation may be insufficient to sustain meaningful educational change. As Mulyasa (2020) argues, principal leadership is not only administrative but also developmental and cultural. In this sense, KPBK strengthens the view that school principals must act as culture builders who create the conditions for teachers to grow professionally and emotionally. A humanistic work environment is therefore not opposed to accountability; rather, it provides the relational foundation that makes accountability more meaningful and sustainable.

The implications of this study extend to principal training and educational policy. Training programs for school principals should not focus only on financial administration, asset management, curriculum supervision, and regulatory compliance. They should also strengthen active listening, emotional intelligence, conflict mediation, professional coaching, and humanistic human resource management. At the policy level, the evaluation of principals should include their capacity to build trust, reduce unnecessary hierarchical distance, support teacher well-being, and cultivate collaborative work cultures. However, these implications must be read cautiously. Because this study is based on a single qualitative case, the KPBK model requires further testing and refinement in different school contexts, including schools with different levels, regions, organizational cultures, and policy pressures. Future studies may also combine qualitative inquiry with quantitative measures of teacher well-being, professional engagement, school climate, and student learning outcomes to examine the broader applicability of the model.

Conclusion

This study concludes that servant leadership practiced by the principal of SMP Negeri 3 Waru Sidoarjo contributed to the formation of a more humanistic work environment through active listening, humility, emotional support, and participatory problem-solving. These practices helped reduce hierarchical distance between the principal and teachers, strengthened teachers and perceived psychological safety, and encouraged more open communication in responding to administrative and curriculum-related challenges. Theoretically, this study proposes the Collectivism-Based Servant Leadership Model, or KPBK, as a contextualized framework for understanding servant leadership in Indonesian schools. By integrating servant leadership principles with local collectivist values such as *gotong royong*, *musyawarah*, and Ki Hajar Dewantara's philosophy of *Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha*, the model shows that servant leadership can gain stronger cultural legitimacy when interpreted through local moral traditions that emphasize example, service, mutual support, and shared responsibility. The study also identifies Double-Loop Empowerment as a qualitative mechanism in which support from the principal strengthens teachers' emotional security and professional confidence and is then reproduced by teachers in more supportive interactions with students.

Practically, the findings suggest that school reform and curriculum implementation require more than administrative compliance, technical training, or policy mandates; they also depend on the quality of human resource governance and the relational climate within the school. Principals who can mediate regulatory pressures, build trust, and support teacher agency may help create conditions that make curriculum adaptation more collaborative and sustainable. Therefore, principal training and evaluation should not focus only on managerial, financial, and supervisory competencies, but should also include active listening, emotional intelligence, conflict mediation, professional coaching, and humanistic human resource management. However, because this study was conducted in a single school with a limited number of participants and did not quantitatively measure teacher burnout, teacher performance, student outcomes, or school effectiveness, the KPBK model should be understood as a context-sensitive framework that requires further empirical refinement. Future studies may examine the model across different school levels, regions, and organizational cultures, or combine qualitative inquiry with quantitative measures of school climate, teacher well-being, professional engagement, and student learning outcomes.

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Ethics Approval

No ethics approval is needed because this study involved non-invasive quantitative survey research collecting anonymous student perception data without intervention, clinical procedures, or sensitive personally identifiable information.

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