Research Article

Servant School Leadership and Organisational Climate in South African Private Schools

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The leadership of companies influences the organisational climate of companies by creating a cycle of continuous improvement or failing to do so. The same applies to educational leadership in their search for favourable teaching and learning conditions for all learners, especially those of underperforming schools whose academic results are not up to standard. Critical dialogue and new thinking regarding school leadership are mandatory to improve the status quo. It is proposed that the servant leadership paradigm, when practiced by school leadership, may have a significant influence on the school environment. A qualitative approach was utilised to measure the impact of servant school leadership on the organisational climate of private schools in South Africa, with the aim of learning valuable lessons to implement in the public school domain and especially the underperforming school sector. A purposive convenience sampling approach was applied to select participants for three focus group interviews. A theoretical thematic, semantic, and essentialist analytical approach served as the foundation for this study. The focus group interviews confirmed that the participants perceived their school leaderships to implement specific characteristics of servant leadership and organisational climate to enhance a positive school environment for teachers and learners to succeed. The participants also perceived definite links between servant leadership and organisational climate. It is recommended that the servant leadership paradigm and its impact on the organisational climate of underperforming schools be researched and considered for implementation nationally and internationally.

1. Introduction

The leadership of companies influences the organisational climate of the environment by creating a cycle of continuous improvement or by failing to do so [1]. The pursuit of enhanced leadership and organisational climate is, therefore, an ongoing challenge for organisations that are dedicated to success [2, 3]. The same applies to the education environment which has the development of favourable teaching and learning conditions for all learners as its core business [4, 5]. The South African education system finds itself at a defining moment in this respect, specifically with regard to the incapacity of many learners of previously underperforming schools to achieve academic success, and there is an unremitting need for improvement

[6–8]. It is claimed that some learners are unable to read and write to any academic standard after 12 years of school [9]. Joubert [7] reported that learners are incapable of doing basic calculations after the first five years at school, and only 50% of all school beginners progress to Grade 12 as a final exit. Statistics indicate that 39 out of every 100 learners of the Grade 12 class of 2020, who enrolled for grade one in 2009, passed the final exam [10]. These results may well be read in the light of other fundamental challenges that are faced by previously underperforming schools, which include poor academic content, inadequate pedagogical knowledge of teachers, mediocre infrastructure, and insufficient resources at those schools [11, 12]. In addition to generally unsafe conditions, those underperforming schools suffer a lack of the basic commodities

of electricity, running water, toilets, books, and teaching material—a situation that can only result in deprived learners and discouraged teachers, which can never be conducive to a successful teaching and learning environment [13–15]. Regarding the social and interactive teaching and learning environment, the COVID-19 epidemic has not only claimed the lives of many South Africans but also eradicated valuable class time of learners due to lockdowns, which makes the previously existing challenges relating to poor performance more acute [16].

Effective school leadership and a beneficial organisational climate are crucial to bringing successful change to the current status quo in underperforming schools in South Africa. To fulfil the constitutional promise of quality education to all learners, new thinking is mandatory and reform initiatives are imperative to advance the teaching and learning environment of those schools [17]. As school leadership is at the hub of all school activities, guiding teachers to achieve common educational goals, it is vital that school leadership supports teachers and learners academically, emotionally, and physically on their journey to success [18]. Therefore, the role of school leadership in underperforming schools to improve the current situation can not be underestimated. A special category of a leader needs to develop, rectify, and improve the existing situation at underperforming schools [19]. Niesche [20] called for critical perspectives regarding leadership to be probed to assist in resolving limitations, tension, and contradictions within the educational system in South Africa. Critical dialogue is essential to overcome the inconsistencies within our educational system and prevail over the analogous monologues of school leadership [21].

When school leadership can create a supportive and empowering milieu for teachers in underperforming schools so that they may engage usefully in their teaching and learning activities, many challenges facing those schools may be overcome in a productive manner [19]. The servant leadership paradigm, when practiced by school leadership, may have a significant influence on the school environment of underperforming schools, as servant leaders acknowledge each individual's abilities and empower individuals to become the optimum they can be [22]. Servant leaders believe in the intrinsic value of each individual, which serves as their central leitmotif of empowerment. Service and concern for the needs of others form the essence of a true servant leaders' identity and may well influence the organisational climate of underperforming schools [23]. This archetype entails distributive and collective leadership, which are fundamental components of successful organisations [24, 25] and contribute to teacher empowerment that impacts the school climate positively [26]. The practice of servant leadership spills over to desirable outcomes for followers and indirectly creates more humane environments [27]. The result may well be the achievement of learner success and acceleration at underperforming schools [1, 28].

All venues need to be exploited to find appropriate solutions for the educational challenges in South Africa. Research conducted at underperforming public schools

indicated that many school environments are still trapped in autocratic and bureaucratic structures [29]. To overcome these monologues of leadership styles, effective leadership needs to be implemented, also impacting the school climate [1]. The current situation at underperforming school pleads for the influence of a more caring and authentic type of leadership style and organisational (school) climate [19]. Swart [30] found that the leadership of historically advantaged public primary and secondary schools in Gauteng, South Africa, was perceived by their teachers to practice the servant leadership characteristics of wisdom, persuasive mapping, and organisational stewardship in their day-to-day routines. These practices may well be components of the successes of these public (historically advantaged) schools regarding productive school climate and good quality results obtained by learners in general [19]. Even though Xaba and Malindi [31] found evidence of successful innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking at three historically disadvantaged schools, those incidences are limited. The characteristics of innovation, proactiveness, and risk-taking form part of the equipment of the servant leader. As servant leadership practices were perceived to be constructive by teachers at the participating public primary and secondary schools in the 2018 study, the current study seeks to analyse the impact of servant leadership practices on the organisational climate of the private school sector in South Africa, in search of constructive answers to assist with the educational challenges in South Africa and especially within the underperforming school environment. For this study, the term "school leadership" refers to the principal and the school management team as one entity. Although Glisson [32] distinguished between organisational climate and organisational culture, the two concepts are considered to represent one entwined dynamic notion for the current study.

The aim of the study was fourfold:

(i) To outline the characteristics of servant leadership which are perceived by participants from private schools as priorities to enhance a successful school environment.

(ii) To describe the characteristics of organisational climate which are observed by participants of private schools as priorities to enhance a successful school environment.

(iii) To explore whether the participants from private schools perceive a link between the themes of servant leadership and organisational climate.

(iv) To utilise the knowledge gained in searching for constructive responses to the educational challenges in underperforming schools in South Africa.

2. Literature Review

The theoretical framework for this study is discussed according to the following topics: the diverse school context in South Africa, school leadership, organisational climate, and servant leadership.

2.1. Diverse School Context in South Africa. The diverse school context in South Africa is a direct result of the systematic and structural separatist approach generated by the political ideals of the apartheid era [33]. This approach led to the separation between advantaged schools, with mostly white learners, and disadvantaged schools with black learners. The separation could never be conducive to healthy teaching and learning activities in disadvantaged schools due to the skirmishes associated with racism, teacher malingering, poor teaching skills, lack of resources, poor socioeconomic circumstances, and so on.

Two entities of schools are found in South Africa: private and public schools. Public schools are divided into two categories. The first category, former Model C or historically advantaged schools, is largely funded and administered by parents and alumni. The second category consists of previously disadvantaged schools financed by the Ministry of Education [18]. Motala [34] posited that the learners in historically white advantaged schools perform better than their counterparts and that their academic competencies improve with their school journey. Those previously advantaged schools are perceived to offer best practices and exceptional facilities, as well as high academic standard teaching and learning activities [35, 36].

In contrast, public underperforming schools in low socioeconomic communities lack adequate funding and monitoring of resources on the part of the government and are characterized by low standards of education, lack of qualified teachers, and absence of equipment in classrooms, all to the detriment of teaching and learning [18]. South Africa's public underperforming schools in rural areas, in particular, face daily new economic, emotional, and social challenges, in addition to the lack of basics such as electricity, running water, toilets, textbooks, learning material, and support staff [37, 38], and consequently experience "constant crisis" [39]. These multifaceted challenges, alongside the issues relating to new curricula, throughput rates, quality control, HIV/AIDS awareness, learners' safety, and poverty alleviation, put immense pressure on the school leadership of underperforming schools [40, 41]. Private schools do not experience all these challenges and are perceived to offer a high standard of education to privileged learners whose parents are unhappy with the standard and quality of schooling that public schools offer [18]. In comparison to public schools, private schools have smaller classes, better results, and more motivated teachers [42]. The perception also exists that the school leadership of private schools displays an elevated level of accountability and a commitment to maintaining the status quo at their schools.

2.2. School Leadership. School leadership should be at the centre of all actions and school activities and aim to direct the behaviours of the teachers to achieve shared educational goals. Successful school leaderships maintain good relationships with teachers and inspire teachers to accomplish tasks in the best interest of the group and within the group's ideals [18]. These good "honest" relations among colleagues enhance the notion of working together [43]. A key task of school leadership is to create a positive school climate where teachers and learners enjoy a high motivation to succeed [43, 44]. The school climate influences the quality of human relationships and is, in turn, impacted by the quality of these relationships [44]. It is also the responsibility of school leadership to motivate staff and generate synergies that move teachers towards success in achieving envisioned objectives. Since less frustrated teachers are more engaged teachers [45], the support provided to teachers by school leadership could impact learners' success, especially in the case of learners from low-income family communities [46]. Sustainable school leadership is essential to improve the current education situation in South Africa, and constructive school leadership, together with a positive school climate, may influence the learning ability of pupils [47].

2.3. Organisational (School) Climate. Schools can be regarded as formal organisations that specialize in the specific field of education [48]. The organisational climate of schools has an impact on the motivation of the teachers, which spills over to the classroom [49]. Leadership has an influence on the organisational climate and enhances the stability and growth of the organisation [50]. There is a strong connection between a leader's behaviour and the organisational climate [3]. The service-climate literature is clear on the influence of the perceptions of employees regarding the managerial practices in their work environment, and the resulting favourable or unfavourable responses of those employees [51]. It has been claimed that employees who work together towards achieving the goals of an organisation, experience cohesiveness that is strengthened by leadership-member relations, team solidarity, and service-oriented organisational behaviours by their leaders [52]. The definitions of and approaches to organisational climate are diverse, although there are similarities among the different models seeking to define this term. For this study, organisational climate refers to "the employees' subjective perceptions of how their work environment affects them as individuals" [53]. A positive organisational climate leads to energy that makes employees willing to walk the extra mile for the organisation [54]. Organisational members' behaviours and attitudes are shaped by an organisational climate that translates into organisational outcomes [55]. Van Deventer [18] believed that the organisational climate of a school inspires teachers positively or influences them negatively, which overflows to what happens in the classroom.

2.4. Servant Leadership. Servant leadership in a school context requires the attitude to bring about and make a difference in a specific school environment [56]. Servant leaders have a natural inclination to serve others [57]. Servant leadership is a practice chosen by leaders who find fulfilment in serving others within their immediate sphere of influence. It is an other-oriented approach to leadership, which manifests through one-on-one prioritizing of followers' individual needs and interests [58]. This paradigm reorientates the concern for the self towards the concern for others within the organisation, as well as the larger

community, and guides the others to become more independent, knowledgeable, and service-orientated [57]. The power of servant leadership is embodied in one's ability to combine the best of being a leader with the best of being a servant [59]. This diverse paradigm can make governance in organisations more trustworthy and accountable, as servant leaders are models of integrity, credibility, intelligence, and the spirit of servant leadership [59]. Greenleaf [57] concluded that the difference between servant leadership and other leadership paradigms entails that servant leaders are genuinely concerned about followers [60]. Servant leadership may hold the key to guiding all role players to progress from uncertainty to a more hopeful future [61]. In schools where the servant leadership paradigm is practiced as precedence, learners are achieving higher levels, according to research conducted in Florida, USA [62]. In concurrence, Black [63] suggested after conducting research at schools in Ontario, Canada, that the language and physiognomies of servant leadership comprised the most appropriate model to be implemented in the educational environment. The servant leadership paradigm is indeed effective at multiple levels in organisations and the trickle-down effect of this leadership style encourages service-orientated behaviours and qualities [64]. Lee et al. [27] concluded that organisations could only benefit from familiarising their current leaders with the servant leadership paradigm.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Goal. A qualitative approach was utilised to use focus group interviews to outline the characteristics of servant leadership and organisational climate as observed by participants from private schools. The identified characteristics can then be submitted as priorities that enhance a successful school environment. A further goal was to explore whether the participants from private schools perceive a link between the themes of servant leadership and organisational climate in their environment.

3.2. Procedure Followed regarding Focus Group Interviews

3.2.1. Setting. The focus group interviews took place in the private school environment. The first two interviews were conducted in settings in the Western Cape, and the third group interview was done in Gauteng.

3.2.2. Focus Group Interviews. The focus group interviews were convened in nonjudgmental, safe, and accepting environments familiar to participants [65]. The semistructured group interviews encouraged participants to share perceptions, points of view, and experiences without the requirement to vote or to reach a consensus [66].

3.2.3. Participants. A purposive convenience sampling approach was applied to select participants for three focus group interviews. Six participants from secondary schools were involved in the first group interview. The second group interview comprised five participants (principals) from

primary and secondary schools. Six participants from primary schools were included in the third group interview. Participants (teachers) had to be qualified in the teaching profession, be proficient in English, and represent the population regarding the proportional scale of female and male teachers. Participants (principals) had to adhere to the same characteristics as the other participants and specifically have experience as principals in the private school setting.

3.2.4. Discussion Guide. A discussion guide was utilised to consistently direct the focus group interviews and facilitate a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Kingry et al., in [67]). The questions and justification of the questions used are set out in Table 1.

3.3. Procedure Followed regarding Analysis

3.3.1. Data Collection. Data was collected from well-known role players in the private school sector. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the start of the sessions. The focus interviews lasted for 90 minutes per session. Detailed field notes and tape recordings were made during all three focus group interviews. A verbatim account of all spoken communication and a description/interpretation of nonverbal communication were documented, and accounts were transcribed by a professional typist with experience in the academic environment. As the data was transcribed by a person other than the researcher, transcriptions were checked against the original recordings for accuracy. The transcript reflected the original nature of all three focus group interviews. Repeated active reading of the data corpus was undertaken to search for meanings and themes that emerged from the data.

3.3.2. Data Analysis. Each transcript was analysed and organised to reflect words, phrases, themes, patterns, suggestions, and frequency of comments that reappeared within a specific focus group interview and among all three group interviews [67, 68]. The coding was done manually and highlighted with an electronic highlighter pen to indicate potential patterns that emerged from the data set [66]. The codes list was sorted according to themes, and potential data extracts were collated within the identified themes. The themes were refined, and during the process, the data set was read once again. The themes were linked to subthemes. A detailed analysis was conducted for each theme that was identified, and the themes were linked to the research questions of the study. An audit trail was thus followed, and it served as a foundation for trustworthy interpretations and valid conclusions [68]. The data gathered by means of focus group interviews is distinct from other forms of qualitative data, and the interactive nature of the discussions was taken into account during all stages of the analysis [68].

3.3.3. Analytical Approach. A theoretical thematic, semantic, and essentialist analytical approach served as the foundation for this study. Researchers utilise thematic

TABLE 1: Specific questions and justification of questions.

Question	Justification
1. What do you understand when you hear the term "servant leadership"?	Critical appraisal of the construct.
2. What do you understand under the term "organisational climate"? Short referral to specific themes	Critical appraisal of the construct.
3. Which 3 characteristics of servant leadership do you consider as decisive for a positive school climate?	Critical appraisal of the presence of this leadership style in the school environment.
4. Which 3 characteristics of organisational (school) climate do you consider as the most important to accentuate?	Delving into the concept of organisational climate and related themes.
5. Do you find a link between servant leadership and school climate?	Reflection on and integration of the manifestation of this leadership style in the organisational (school) climate.

analysis as a method to identify, analyse, and report themes and subthemes that emerged from the data [69]. The researcher had a theoretical or analytic interest in the area of study. Thus, the analysis was more explicitly determined. This form of analysis focuses less on a rich description of the data overall but rather concentrates on a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data. The analytic process entails a progression from the description—where the data has simply been organised and summarised to indicate themes in semantic content—to interpretation. The interpretation attempts to theorise the significance of the themes and their broader meanings and implications [70] and often relates to previous literature [69].

4. Findings

The findings of this study are presented according to the aims of this study and the thematic analysis approach as utilised by this study.

Aim 1: to outline the characteristics of servant leadership, perceived by participants from private schools as priorities to enhance a successful school environment.

Overall, the participants were found to be acquainted with the construct of servant leadership. One participant linked the construct directly to religion: "For me it's like a church, coming from a church background, to be a servant of the Lord, to lead from there, that's what I would see as servant leadership, because you're serving somebody."

4.1. Empowerment.
The attribute of empowerment was utilised by most of the participants when defining the servant leadership paradigm. Participants linked empowerment to participation in decision-making and to empowerment of the community overall:

"For me, it's ultimately not about me. It's about empowering the other. It is about empowering my leadership team, for them it's about empowering teachers and ultimately because we're a school it's about empowering the children, and through that, the community is empowered."

"So, you include everybody, don't just make a decision as a particular group. The school is a big school, you've got to include everybody, thereby empowering them."

4.2. Accountability.
The characteristic of accountability frequently featured throughout all three interviews. One participant mentioned in this regard: "You need to be able to be accountable for the decisions that you have made or that you have guided your team to take." Another participant made the following remark in support of the previous statement: "I think in today's life, people tend to run away from accountability and courage quite a lot, because they don't want to take the step."

4.3. Humility.
The trait of humility was also put forward by participants during all interviews. One participant expressed the following detail in this regard: "For me it has got a lot to do with being humble, as a leader, and setting aside the ego. So that you can make space for others who show potential for leadership to step forward." Another participant agreed with the statement and related the characteristic of courage to humility: "Yes, and to admit to your mistakes." The characteristic of humility was also connected to adaptability and flexibility. Participants made the following remarks:

Put adaptability in there, because, we have to adapt to different situations all the time. When you leave your classroom, you go to the sport field, where you have to be a leader there. Then after sport you have a parent's meeting. Now that's an example of adaptability, especially in educational circuit, the circumstances. We adapt all the time.

I must say, there is a flexibility from school leadership, as we are not afraid to say, "no, this is not working at grass root level, let's adapt a little.

4.4. Courage.
Some participants referred to the importance of courage as part of the personification of servant leaders. They mentioned the following:

Courage is to go forward, even though it might be in the wrong direction, um, if you feel you are right, or you can, then you have the courage to stand by it, but know that you're going to have something maybe fighting for it.

Courage, it requires you not to be egocentric, it then makes you more real and it makes you responsible for the environment you're in, and then it comes all the way back to, to me, to empowerment.

I think for me the first thing is courage. Because, I've got to say to them, "I don't agree with what you're doing," and you know, I can't stand back, I just cannot stand back, and I'm forever at loggerheads with some of them, but it's courage having to say to them, "this is, I don't believe in this, I believe we should be going that way.

This qualitative study unquestionably confirmed that the characteristics of empowerment, accountability, humility, and courage—interlinking with one another—are prominent servant leadership characteristics perceived by participants from private schools as priorities implemented by school leadership to enhance a successful school environment. These outcomes correlate with the results of a quantitative study previously conducted in the same context of private schools [19].

Aim 2: to describe the characteristics of organisational climate which are observed by participants from private schools as priorities to enhance a successful school environment.

4.5. Training and Development.
The aspect of training and development was perceived during all interviews as the foremost factor influencing the school climate. The following remarks were made in this regard:

You must have a good training and trust that the training is good to get a good job satisfaction.

Training is needed for your needs and, also, for information for where you are specifically working.

Training and development are so important, that I will have the opportunity to experience growth, training, whatever I need to improve on my job as a teacher.

We do training, so that everybody knows exactly what's going on, everyone is on the same page.

4.6. Communication.
Communication was highly regarded by the participants as a dynamic that improves the school climate. Some of the comments were linked to other concepts as indicated in brackets:

We spoke about the important aspect of communication, that it is the author of an environment.

I think communication and trust goes together in a way, because, if there's communication, successful communication, like in a school, between teachers and everyone, you start to trust one another. So, that's very important. (Trust)

To let them feel heard, they need to have a voice, I think that's very important. They need to feel like they are actually stakeholders in the school. They are a big part of what we're about, so they need to have a buy in and have a voice to know that they are part of this bigger school system or place, and that it's safe for them to move within those kinds of limitations, if we can call them that, and then, that they also have a safe net that they can fall into. (Listening)

I think, communication is key to build trust and to build staff wellness and just like everything else, we need the communication to kind of tie in with the insight that golden thread that goes through, no matter what we do, communication is always key. (Employee wellness)

I will also say communication. Open communication. Communication is for me like a key. If there's no communication, everything falls flat. If there's no communication between your team, nothing's going to work. (Transparency)

4.7. Trust.
The importance of trust as key element for a successful school climate was also emphasised by the participants. Trust also correlated with constructive concepts.

I like what you said, trusting that the person next to you is doing what they are supposed to do, and just trusting each other that we all have a common goal in mind and we're doing our part to working towards that. You don't have to look over each other's shoulders, that the next one is doing what they supposed to do. You can trust each other, we all do. (Teamwork)

I think that if the leader does all of those things, you are actually building trust. But, it's, it's a two-way trust, because it's, it's, it's a, um, you trust me but, by you trusting me, I am able to trust myself, and I will trust you. So, there is that reciprocal nature, the giving and the taking of trust. And that to me is empowering.

I think, trust obviously. If they don't trust you, and they don't trust the company, they don't trust what you stand for, you can do all of the rest, but nothing will come up. So, they need to trust it once again, so that they've got a by-in. (Ownership)

Trust is such a difficult one as well to maintain because, trust can be broken or seems to be broken, if people don't fully understand reasons that management does things.

That was the first time I had to lead, and she trusted me to lead and that's the only place I ever learned how to be sort of a leader for my children in my class. (Empowerment)

4.8. Work Environment.
The fourth most prominent attribute referred to by the participants to enhance a positive school climate was the work environment. Once again, this construct was linked to other characteristics alike harmony, relationships and teamwork, unified understanding, employee wellness, and leadership. Once again, these themes were also linked to servant leadership. These attributes were defined as follows:

If you don't have harmony, you don't have balance and you don't have a love or a thing a concern for each and every individual, your climate is always going to be toxic. So, if there is that, you are going to work in harmony with your organization or people, you're not going to have an organization, and you're not going to be a have a happy mode

working environment. And I think that is vital, especially when we are in the office of assisted learning. (Harmony)

I think, if your organisational climate is bad, you're going to have bad results at that end. But, if you come in with a relationship of 'we can all work together' and sort of focus together and be positive about it, then your organization will be good. (Relationships and teamwork)

You know, it's exactly that, if you have your mission and your vision and your strategies that you put in place, but your..., the people actually doing the work, actually making the business work or school work, if they aren't happy, or if they don't understand the goals of, of the company or of the school, or the ethos of the school, then you're not going to have a healthy climate. So, the working environment, the atmosphere, relationships between the role players within the school are not going to function as they should, because there isn't a unified understanding of what is supposed to be happening. (Unified understanding)

Ja, in a way, directly, indirectly, they are linked in some way. Because, if you say a, let's say for example, a work environment, combine that with employee wellness. If the teacher is not happy, he's not going to be well. If the teacher is sick, that work environment is going to go down. So, in other words, they work one way or the other way into each other. (Employee wellness)

I think the climate of the school or organization, is often determined by, by the leaders, by his or her approach. If you've got a leader with a positive spirit and a mindset, kind of approach, that is the climate you're going to experience in that school, but if you've got a leader that always just sees doom and gloom all the time, all the negative things happening in the world, and that is being pulled into your staff, into your school and that is the climate you're going to experience eventually. (Leadership)

I think, for me, it all starts with the work environment, the work environment will be influenced firstly, by the leadership. (Leadership)

It was found that the groupings of training and development, communication, trust, and work environment are perceived by participants from private schools as prominent features of organisational climate put in place by school leadership to augment a successful school environment.

The themes of emotional wellness, leadership, job satisfaction, remuneration, and teamwork were indirectly addressed by the participants during the interviews, as indicated in the brackets. This also serves as an indication that there is a link between servant leadership and organisational climate in the private school segment in South Africa.

Aim 3: to investigate whether the participants from private schools perceived a link between the themes of servant leadership and organisational climate.

The linking of the different concepts, as discussed in the previous paragraphs, supports the perception that the participants perceived a relationship between the concepts of servant leadership and organisational climate. The

participants mentioned several direct links between the themes when they were specifically requested to indicate whether they observed a relation between the two themes. Remarks were as follows.

4.8.1. Servant Leadership and Values. "Yes. And we live that you know. We are a school with strong values, and they link all the time. Because, isn't that what servant leadership means? And we live it through actions at school, So, um, that's where we link the two as well. It's in our school climate."

4.8.2. Humility and Organisational Management. Another participant linked humility and organisational management when answering the question: "It does, being a servant leader, you know how to work under someone, and you know how to take instructions as well. You need someone else to tell you what to do to do a great job."

4.8.3. Servant Leadership and Organisational Leadership. One principal associated the leadership of organisations with servant leadership: "It is this whole traditional leadership that we've always had, where you've had the chief and you've had the others. And, what we say now is, "no, we want to serve everybody. I'm not the chief, we're working together.""

4.8.4. Courage and the Work Environment. One teacher allied the aspect of courage and the work environment: "I will show the courage to never take part in a strike action in education with my peers. I think it is criminal against children if teachers strike. As a servant, how can I do that? I do the best for these children."

4.8.5. Stewardship and Teamwork. The aspects of stewardship and teamwork were coupled as follows: "I think that if we are working unselfishly, then we can be steward leaders and servant leaders and help people. If we really work as a team, sometimes, someone below the leader or the manager can help them if they're making a mistake or if they haven't experienced something that someone on a different level has experienced before. I think it's very important. I think it creates a healthy, helping environment and everyone feels free to bring ideas to the table." It can be concluded that the participants perceived several links between the themes of servant leadership and organisational climate that encourage a constructive school environment. These associations were made between servant leadership and values, humility and organisational management, servant leadership and organisational leadership, courage and the work environment, and stewardship and teamwork.

5. Discussion

This discussion aims to consider the themes of servant leadership and organisational climate that were perceived by the respondents to enhance a positive school environment, and to consider how this information could be utilised to

confront the educational challenges in underperforming schools in South Africa.

5.1. Servant Leadership

5.1.1. Empowerment. From the focus group interviews, it became clear that school leaderships of private schools prioritise empowerment to enhance their school organisational climate.

This approach is supported by Allie [71] who found that schools achieve more academic success and greater general school effectiveness where leadership adopts a participatory leadership style and empowers teachers to become involved in sharing responsibility and decision-making. In addition, Warrick [72] posited that a successful leader involves the appropriate people to diagnose scenarios and to assess possible actions to be taken before making important decisions and changes. Some of the participants connected empowerment to modelling, thereby indicating that empowerment can be a consequence of the servant leaders' behaviour. This is an accolade for private schools because servant leaders are trusted for their covenantal relationships, responsible morality, and transforming influence [73]. In the case of underperforming schools, the implementation and modelling of the construct of empowerment by servant school leaderships may well result in teachers who make positive contribution to their schools voluntarily, as they gradually acquire the habits of their leaders who serve them [27, 74].

5.1.2. Accountability. The practice of accountability by school leadership of private schools was perceived by the participants of the focus groups as an important component of a successful school environment. Accountability entails that leaders and their followers are held accountable for their performances and creates a setting where the servant leader gives the responsibility for outcomes to individuals and teams while overseeing the process [75, 76]. Accountability provides boundaries within which individuals and teams are free to accomplish the set goals and serves as a powerful tool to demonstrate confidence in followers [77]. The implementation of the construct of accountability by school leaderships at underperforming schools may well result in teachers taking ownership of their situation with confidence to bring hope to learners that they can succeed in their dreadful circumstances. The prospect of success is supported by Plessis et al. [78], who concluded that companies who implement servant leadership as a cornerstone to their organisational model performed more than twice the other companies.

5.1.3. Humility. The focus group interviews indicated that the participants perceived the practice of humility by school leadership as a positive contributor to creating a constructive school environment. This understanding underscores that humility in leadership is an important antidote to humankind's hubris, greed, inflated egos, and misbehaviour,

which can only be destructive to organisations [79]. Humility is a constructive characteristic that brings a positive return to teams and organisations, and it may be learned and developed [79–82]. The servant leader builds up everyone except for himself/herself and is delighted to see others grow [83]. It could be to the benefit of the school leadership of underperforming schools to take note of this practice of humility, as the outcome of the practice of humility may well be that disheartened teachers become encouraged teachers once again who believe in education as humanity's project of hope and adapt to their circumstances to the best interest of their learners [13, 84].

5.1.4. Courage. The focus group interviews confirm the perception that school leaderships of private schools undeniably display the characteristic of courage in their search for a productive organisational climate. Breed [85] believed that courage is needed to throw a structure off balance (create disequilibrium) so that it can grow and change. Courageous servant leaders serve as trailblazers removing obstacles on the way to successful school environments [86]. The servant leader's main goal is to improve the well-being of their subordinates, customers, and community. They are not swayed by pressure to conform to corporate norms solely so that the organisation can be deemed legitimate or to give in to external pressure. Where courage is practiced by school leadership of underperforming schools, the potential outcome is that this foundational underpinning motivates teachers from those schools to stand brave against their daily challenges and to prevail in the best interest of their learners [87]. The courage of character, vision, and innovation may well be just what underperforming schools need to progress.

5.2. Organisational Climate

5.2.1. Training and Development. Training and development were perceived as playing a definite role in enhancing a positive organisational climate in private schools. This agrees with Nuri and Dagli [88] who postulated that school leaderships that prioritise training and development have a great likelihood of establishing a positive organisational school climate. Botha [40] considered leadership development as fundamental to bringing about change. Owens et al. [82] suggested that leadership characteristics can be learnt and developed by means of training, mentoring, and coaching. Special attention needs to be given to employees who strive for a better understanding of the servant leadership paradigm, as these employees are more amenable to engaging effectively in learning behaviours such as empathy, autonomy, and individualized consideration (Rai and Prakash, 2016). The Ministry of Education and school leaderships may well take note that constructive training and development facilitate cognitive engagement, and both are positively associated with perceived job satisfaction, a factor that can assist with overcoming the challenges encountered in underperforming schools [89]. It may also be that training and development sessions can enhance good relations between school leadership and teachers, which can only benefit

a progressive school climate in underperforming schools [88].

5.2.2. Communication.

Effective communication from school leadership of private schools was perceived by the participants to enhance a positive school climate. This correlates with the view of Russel and Stone [90] who perceive communication, persuasion, listening, and encouragement as fundamentals of effective leadership. A school environment, which offers opportunities for all teachers to collaborate in participative decision-making and encourages teachers to perceive their relationship with colleagues as one with open communication and a free flow of ideas, increases teachers' commitment and identification with a school [91]. When the Ministry of Education commits to communication and really listens to the needs and challenges communicated by underperforming schools and teachers, with the intention of acting on the communication received, it may generate commitment from all role players at those schools to augment positive teaching and learning activities for learners to succeed.

5.2.3. Trust.

The climate of trust engendered by school leadership in private schools was also perceived by the participants as motivating a successful school environment. Leadership can be described as an art that influences and directs others towards common goals so that leaders gain the trust, respect, cooperation, and compliance of their followers [92]. The practice of servant leadership promotes the development of trust, fairness, and high-quality leader–follower relationships. These relationships create psychologically safe and fair climates, where employees perceive that they can be themselves, make their own decisions, and feel connected to others [52]. Where school leadership of underperforming schools earns teachers' trust and respect via the practice of procedural justice coupled with good personal relationships, the teachers may well be prepared to walk the extra mile for their learners to succeed as those influences spill over to desirable outcomes from followers [27].

5.2.4. Work Environment.

The immediate work environment affected by servant school leadership of private schools was also observed by the respondents to encourage a constructive school environment. This observation agrees with statements by various scholars who found that servant leaders introduce caring climates to organisations, which influences employees to have positive perceptions about the quality of organisational life [74, 93]. The practice of servant leadership trickles down from management to employees and increases motivation and work performance [94]. Bryk and Schneider [95] recommended that top-down leadership approaches be replaced with an ethos of collaboration, trust, and networking in schools. Ash and Persall [96] noted that top-down leadership styles, hierarchies, and bureaucracies—characteristic of public schools—tend to isolate teachers from each other and limit the practice of teacher leadership in schools. By understanding and addressing the feelings and emotions of followers, servant leaders inculcate a sense of cohesiveness, collaboration, and sustainable relationships amongst their followers. The practice of school servant leadership in underperforming schools may bring about an increase in behaviours related to empathy, compassion, altruism, and healing capabilities, thereby building a mentally and emotionally healthy work environment, which is indispensable to change the present circumstances at those schools [97].

From the focus group interviews, it was evident that the participants perceived several links between the constructs of servant leadership and organisational climate in the private school environment.

5.2.5. Servant Leadership and Values.

This first link relates to the viewpoint of Crippen [98] that leadership entails that the leader in an organisation should be known as a steward concerning relations, resources, legacy, momentum, effectiveness, respect, and values.

5.2.6. Humility and Organisational Management.

The second link perceived by participants correlates with the position taken by Doraiswamy in [99] that the servant leader paradigm requires a great deal of humility, as the servant leader does not mind giving the stage to someone with superior abilities. The servant leader is selfless and does not strive to ascend a career ladder in management but is rather committed to the success of the organisation [2]. Servant leadership and organisational structure can work in a complementary manner to create a positive work environment [23].

5.2.7. Servant Leadership and Organisational Leadership.

The third link that was perceived by the respondents underscored that collaborative leadership, as an outcome of servant leadership, can be hindered in organisations by autocratic hierarchical leadership structures. If servant leadership is mastered successfully, it will flatten the hierarchy within organisations [100, 101]. Grant [102] pointed out that the development of a teacher leadership culture is an evolutionary process, underpinned by a new understanding of leadership.

5.2.8. Courage and the Work Environment.

The fourth link that was perceived by the respondents was that courage is needed to change direction and discover unchartered waters [103], that is, to change the work environment. Courage is imperative for any system to maintain balance, grow, and change [85].

5.2.9. Stewardship and Teamwork.

The final link discussed by the participants accentuated the view of Barbuto and Wheeler [104] who posited that stewardship means that organisations and their members are prepared by leadership to make great team contributions to society. Where team

members experience cohesiveness, they work together to achieve the team task objective and support other teams to succeed [52]. The behaviour of servant leaders is reflected in the way employees treat each other [23].

The constructs of servant leadership and organisational climate were perceived by the participants to overlap and play a significant role in creating positive environments at private schools. The Ministry of Education needs to take note of the constructs and the positive links found between servant leadership and organisational climate and may well consider including the perceived topics in the curriculum of all future educators.

6. Conclusion

The practice of servant school leadership in private schools plays a fundamental role in creating a positive organisational (school) climate. Servant leadership and organisational climate characteristics interconnect and are essential to improve educational results. This study contributes to the current body of knowledge, which has the potential to be utilised in the public-school sector and stimulate the South African school system to move forward towards productive teaching and learning activities, especially at under-performing schools. The consequences could be improved academic success and a better future for many learners.

6.1. Limitations and Recommendations. This study has the limitation that the generalisability of the outcomes must be approached with caution, as the findings were obtained from the private school sector. It is recommended that school leaderships mentor and guide teachers to take ownership of the themes of servant leadership and organisational climate. It is further recommended that the servant leadership paradigm and its potential or even actual impact on the organisational climate of public schools be researched. It is suggested that the education faculties of universities consider the introduction of the constructs of leadership and organisational climate to future teachers and leaders so that they may become acquainted with these significant and vital concepts before embarking on their journey as educators.

Data Availability

The data are available at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria.

Disclosure

An abstract covering some aspects of this research (not an article) was published in the International Journal of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering after submission of the abstract to the International Conference on Organizational Climate and Leadership [105].

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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