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Kong Wah Cora CHAN  
corahui@cais.edu.hk

Gloria So  
gloriaso@cais.edu.hk

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# Cultivating Servant Leaders in Secondary Schooling

CHAN, Kong Wah Cora, University of Bristol  
Gloria B. K. So, University of London

## **Abstract**

*This empirical study explored learners' experiences of a service learning co-curricular program. Learners aged 15 to 17 of a Hong Kong international school were interviewed in three semi-structured focus groups. These qualitative data were analyzed thematically, and reveal that these participants had opportunities to develop servant leadership traits through their service learning process. It is argued that secondary schools can be a suitable training ground to cultivate servant leaders. The servant leader traits as listed by Spears (2010) are good components of a character education program. A servant leadership training framework is presented with three stages: serving, leading, and building community. Through this framework, youth serve through empathetic listening and action. They lead with intentionality and pursue a growth mindset. They make plans and persuade others into building community. Through discussion, practice, and reflection, service learning is a pathway to cultivate servant leaders in secondary schooling.*

**Keywords:** Service Learning, Servant Leader, Servant Leadership Training Framework

The concept of servant leadership is unorthodox in the sense that it is not about heroic leadership, but the development of others for their betterment. A servant leader has emergent authority and uses such authority ethically and morally as a basis to serve others. A servant leader is a giver in social interaction, who defines and measures the success of their leadership by the well-being and advancement of those whom he/she leads.

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The term servant leadership was first coined by Robert Greenleaf (1970) in his essay series titled *The Servant as Leader*. The literature review of this paper outlines Greenleaf's philosophy of servant leadership with two illustrations. The values and characteristics of a servant leader are described and culminate with a biblical example. The merit of youth leadership training is also discussed. This leads to the unfolding of the research rationale, questions, conceptual framework and design. The interview results provide evidence of learners, developing servant leadership qualities in the process of working through various community service projects. The latter part of this paper presents a servant leadership training framework in secondary schooling. The authors argue that secondary schooling could and should cultivate servant leaders among students, through curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular program designs.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

A servant leader has dual roles which are interconnected and interchangeable. Trompenaars and Voerman (2009) explain that servant leader is a compound noun; the word *servant* is not a modifier of the word *leader*. Yet, Greenleaf emphasizes that the best leader is first a servant and servant leadership is a choice:

It begins with the natural feeling one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first. ... The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is that: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (Greenleaf, 1970, p.13).

Furthermore, Greenleaf asserts that service to others develops legitimate power for leadership:

A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader (Greenleaf, 1977, p.10).

A servant leader focus in leadership is for others to reach for their full potential. An effective leader has the combination of servanthood and leadership competency, but it begins with a servant heart, the focus of placing others before self. The being of a servant is the identity of a servant leader and the title of a leader is the role one plays in his/her sphere of influence.

Greenleaf's idea of servant leadership comes from his interpretation and application of *Journey to the East*, a novel written by Hermann Hesse (1956). The story is about a

group of men going on a mythical journey and each of them has his own aspiration and dream. One of the men is Leo, a servant who does chores and encourages the others with his songs and positive spirit. In an unfortunate turn of the plot, Leo goes missing. Subsequently, the group falls apart and the journey dissolves itself. The narrator wanders for years and is eventually taken to the Order that had sponsored the journey. He is surprised to find Leo and comes to the realization that Leo, being the servant, was truly the head of the Order. Greenleaf's view of Leo is that:

Leo portrays at once two roles that are often seen as antithetical in our culture: the servant who, by acting with integrity and spirit, builds trust and lifts people and helps them grow, and the leader who is trusted and who shapes others' destinies by going out ahead to show the way (2003, p.32).

Leo embraces the hybrid identity of a servant leader, serving by leading and leading by serving.

Another important aspect of servant leadership is the mentorship and friendship, as illustrated between Charlotte the spider and Wilbur the pig in the children's classic, *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952). Wilbur, who was born a runt, lives in the barnyard of Zuckerman. With the help of Charlotte, Wilbur enters a county fair, becomes famous and escapes the fate of slaughter. Prior to the passing of his best friend, Wilbur asks Charlotte why she has helped him. Charlotte replies,

I wove my webs for you because I liked you. After all, what's a life anyway? We're born; we live a little while; we die. A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you I was trying to lift my life up a trifle (White, 1952, p.164).

Charlotte and Wilbur's symbiotic relationship brings wholeness to both the leader and the led. As well, Charlotte and Wilbur live in a barn, a community with different animals under the same roof, showing the importance of friendship and mentorship between distinctly different characters. The farewell speech of Charlotte to Wilbur hints at the transcendent nature of human beings to live beyond one's self-imposed limitations and the importance of uplifting and encouraging others as a method of establishing meaning for self.

### **Values of a Servant Leader: Diversity and Relationships**

A servant leader values diversity and acknowledges the intrinsic worth of each member in the community. Each member is valuable and has different talents that are integral to the whole. A servant leader desires to create the context in which these gifts can be developed and polished. De Pree (1989) states that a servant leader is committed to an institutional population as "a reflection of God's diversity, not of our choices" (p.86). This implies that a servant leader aims to celebrate differences, rather than promote

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identical followers. A servant leader values diversity in their community and enables others to discover and reach for their own potential for the good of the team as well as growth of the individual. This is collaboration, in which everyone contributes for collective success, instead of competition, in which they compete against each other for survival of the fittest.

A servant leader considers that power passes through, but not from him/her (Blanchard, 2007). He/she is entrusted with moral and ethical responsibilities, to use his/her emergent power for the benefit of others. A servant leader values relational effectiveness. He/She intends to use referent power and relational authority to create opportunities for others to become autonomous.

### **Ten Characteristics of a Servant Leader**

Spears (2010) derived a set of ten characteristics of a servant leader from Greenleaf's writings. Spears believes that these traits are critically essential to the development of servant leaders.

**1. Listening.** A servant leader listens carefully to what is being said and not said. He/She seeks to identify and help clarify the will of others. Listening is more than a technique, but an attitude in understanding. In addition, a servant leader pays attention to his/her own inner voice through ongoing reflection.

**2. Empathy.** A servant leader is an empathetic listener, demonstrating acceptance and understanding. A servant leader assumes the good intentions of others. A servant leader conveys to others that their value is not based on their performance, but who they are as people with intrinsic worth.

**3. Healing.** A servant leader recognizes that people may come with broken experiences and suffer from emotional hurts. He/She reaches out to others who are hurt and brings healing and restoration to them. They partner together to overcome life's obstacles and mend relationships. Healing empowers one to accept opportunities for growth and further development.

**4. Awareness.** A servant leader needs to view situations holistically, evaluating issues against ethics, power, and values. Greenleaf (1977) states that "able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity" (p.41). Solitude in the art of withdrawal enhances the servant leader's general awareness and self-awareness, restoring inner serenity.

**5. Persuasion.** A servant leader does not coerce others into compliance or performance. A servant leader convinces others to reach consensus. A servant leader is relational, and persuades others to collaborate and achieve collective success.

**6. Conceptualization.** A servant leader is a visionary who has great dreams. He/She cannot be consumed by short-term operational goals and lose sight of the big picture and vision for the institution. It takes discipline and practice to balance conceptual thinking and a day-to-day operational approach.

**7. Foresight.** A servant leader learns from past mistakes and has a good understanding of present reality. A servant leader foresees possible future events and anticipates their consequences from trend analysis. A servant leader is conscious of making ethical choices to avoid future failure.

**8. Stewardship.** A servant leader is a steward who is committed to serving the needs of others. In addition, a servant leader is held accountable for the success of the organization in meeting its goals, as well as its relationship with and impact on the society.

**9. Commitment to the Growth of People.** A servant leader has a growth mindset, believing that everyone can gain new understanding and has the potential to reach higher levels of achievement. A servant leader desires to nurture and is interested to facilitate the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of self and others. This implies that one can spot a servant leader because people around him/her grow in knowledge, skills and an overall outlook for life.

**10. Building Community.** A servant leader builds community in order to connect people within an institution so they can draw support from one another and find their sense of belonging. A servant leader draws people together to form supportive networks.

Overall, the philosophy, values and characteristics of servant leadership are personified in Jesus Christ, the center figure of the Holy Bible. Jesus, as presented in the Holy Bible, is the son of God and the holy servant. The son of God chose to become a servant. His divine nature was concealed so that his human nature was brought forth. Jesus accepted people from all walks of life. He not only spent time with his family and disciples, but also befriended prostitutes, tax collectors, and the outcast of society. He not only preached in synagogues and had dialogues with the Pharisees, priests and teachers of the Law, but also taught and fed thousands who followed him. He listened, he empathized, and he healed.

In the concept of servant leadership, the leadership aspect is emphasized and legitimized through the process of serving. Jesus used his power to serve others providing healing to the sick, hope for the despairing, and comfort for the weary. He endured the cross and became the way to mend the broken relationships between God and humanity. He was the capstone on which the community of believers established their shared vision and faith. An analogy of a church is a body with many parts; each part is unique in its function and is valuable to the overall health of the body (1 Corinthians 12: 12-30). A servant leader develops others to be and become servant leaders. Jesus asked his disciples to emulate him, saying “now that I, your lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also

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should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:14-15). Servant leadership, as demonstrated in Jesus, is a blend of immanence with transcendence, and servanthood with leadership. The ontological imperative of servant leadership is the person *being* a servant and then *becoming* more effective in his/her role, to serve others.

### **Relevance of Servant Leadership Training to Learners in Secondary Schools**

Servant leadership has relevance in various arenas, seasons, and stages of life, including character development of learners in secondary schooling. In the book *The Case for Servant Leadership*, Keith advocated that

Servant-leaders can be government officials, business executives, academic administrators, non-profit leaders, military commanders, coaches, friends, or neighbors. Servant-leaders do most of the things that other leaders do - they provide a vision, they motivate, they manage, they communicate, and so forth. What sets servant-leaders apart from other leaders is that they are focused on others, not just themselves, and they are motivated to make life better for others, not just for themselves. This difference in focus and motivation is what really distinguishes servant-leaders, regardless of their titles, roles, or positions (Keith, 2008, p.9-10).

Servant leadership is a style of leadership that offers a framework for individuals to find meaning in work and life. Finding meaning in life is powerful to sustain one's intrinsic motivation, as well as emotional and mental health. It is a source of deep happiness, despite various circumstances. These qualities are desirable for adolescent learners to determine the purpose and priorities of their present study and future career and family path. Hence, servant leadership training should be considered in secondary schooling.

### **Youth Leadership Development**

While there is a plethora of research on qualities of adult leadership (Brown, 2004; Ciulla, 2004) and the development of youth as future leaders (Wheeler & Edlebeck, 2006), the area of investing in youth development for leadership for the present has not been as widely explored. Youth leadership literature often focuses on prevention strategies to risky behavior of youth (Whitehead, 2009), civic activism (Kirshner, 2007; Ginwright & James, 2002), and educational leadership program development (Larkin & Mahoney, 2006). As a result, investigating literature on adult leadership paradigms gives insight to what defines leadership for individuals. Although for youth, who are in the midst of identity formation and where collective belonging is prioritised, there is much that can be applied from adult leadership literature in explaining how leadership opportunities can mold identity and create a sense of belonging.

The process of youth development is often seen as a transient period. Youth undergo rapid changes in their physical, psychological and social state, as their identities are fluid. How youth take up issues, the spaces in which they do, and their understanding of these issues all shift at a rapid pace (Linds, Goulet & Sammel, 2010). As a strategy to develop youth leadership, youth are continually supported through consistent and structured activities that further deepen knowledge, their commitment, and opportunity for action (Wheeler & Edlebeck, 2006). Educators also have a role in creating spaces as places for critique, hope, and action (Allen, 1999). Adolescents in particular appear to have an innate motivation for self-expansion, which is achieved through including others in the self (Bracher, 2006). Guided by adult educators as “threshold people” (Daloz Keen & Parks, 1996, p.53), this process of self-expansion is a type of transformative learning, where youthful mindsets shift, impacting their interactions with their community and the world (Daloz et al., 1996). Through adult guidance in the process of youth transformation and self-awareness, individuals can foster a desire for self-directed learning, develop an awareness of how they might change oppressive power structures, and build confidence and skills to work for collective change (Brown, 2004). Students can then experience education as something they do, not as something done for them, where they “become conscious about their presence in the world. The way they act and think when they develop all of their capacities, tak[ing] into consideration their needs, but also the needs and aspirations of others” (Freire & Betto, 1985, p.14-15). These are elements that are needed in the development of youth leadership.

The philosophy, values and characteristics of servant leadership is applicable to youth leadership development. So (2014) defined that

Youth leadership is the relational process of negotiating authority, sharing abilities, and equipping individuals with the common vision that all individuals can be leaders to benefit their sphere of influence in the present, regardless of age or position (p.13).

So considered that service learning is an avenue for youth leadership development. With adult guidance and mentorship, youth leaders are empowered to make decisions, take ownership of the actions, share responsibilities with their peers, and reflect on their growth. Their relationship is similar to Charlotte and Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web*. The role of a youth leader can change as these young individuals have been equipped to possess the ability to positively influence their personal sphere of influence and equip others to become leaders. The promotion of servant leadership in positive youth leadership development can be another method of leadership where decisions are made to enhance the entire group. Servant leaders see their role as a position of responsibility, value fairness and integrity, and measure success by the work, support, and dedication of all members (Libby, Sedonaen, & Bliss, 2006). Servant leadership does not focus on selfish ambition or one particular individual, but the facilitation and equipping of the group for the common good, a skill that should be developed in youth leadership development.



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The belief, values, and character traits of servant leadership challenge youth leaders to examine their roles and responsibilities in their present community and future society. Greenleaf (1970) stated that servant leadership is not a management technique but a way of life, allowing those who make this choice to unleash its power and promise. The concept of servant leadership is applicable and beneficial to youth leadership development.

### **Purpose of the Study, Research Questions, and Conceptual Framework**

The aim of this study is to explore a possible pathway to cultivate servant leadership attributes among learners in secondary schooling. This empirical study is conducted in a secondary school in Hong Kong. In recent years, there have been empirical studies of servant leadership with adult participants at school setting in the areas of school climate (Black, 2010), organizational commitment (Cerit, 2010), student achievement (Lambert, 2004), job satisfaction (McKenzie, 2012), and teaching effectiveness (Metzcar, 2008). The nature of servant leadership study of secondary learners (aged 15-17) is lacking and can be a worthwhile exploration. Hence, the following research questions are formulated.

1. Can servant leadership training be a part of a secondary school co-curriculum program?
2. How is servant leadership developed in learners at a secondary school?

Empirical studies of servant leadership are multi-faceted, with scholars' interests ranging from the attributes of servant leaders (Spears, 2010), and the behaviors of servant leaders (Sendjaya, 2003), to the culture of servant leadership organization (Laub, 1999). This research study aims to focus on the character development of learners and their journey towards servant leadership. Hence, the conceptual framework is based on the ten characteristics of servant leaders as outlined by Spears (2010). They include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, conceptualization, foresight, persuasion, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and community building.

## **METHOD**

This is a qualitative study, through the lens of an interpretivist, exploring the experiences of learners aged 15 to 17, who chose to participate in a co-curricular program of a secondary school in Hong Kong. Under this lens, participants' reality is socially constructed and the way of knowing is developed experientially by each of the subjects through their personal interaction with their context (Creswell, 2003; Crotty, 1998).

### **Context**

The study context is a K-12 international school in Hong Kong. The purpose of the co-curricular program is to provide learners, teenagers and young children, agency to act and a voice in addressing various social justice issues in their local context. They are

encouraged to be change agents and take action to make a difference in their community through teaching, mentorship, and service projects.

In an academic year, fourteen secondary students (aged 15 to 17) signed up for this program. They received weekly training from their program coordinator (the teacher in charge of this program). They also worked in teams of four to five students, co-planning their activities. Each of them met with an assigned primary 4, 5, or 6 grade class regularly to develop and act upon a community project until its fruition. When each participant met with the assigned primary class, the classroom teacher was present to provide support as needed. These secondary participants also met with the primary classroom teachers for briefing, planning, and receiving feedback.

## Participants

The secondary learners who participated in the service learning program were invited for focus-group interviews. Out of fourteen participants, eleven of them took part in three focus-group interviews. They were referred to as student-leaders by the primary students.

## Research Design

The student-leaders who worked with the same grade level primary classes were grouped together for an interview of 60 minutes. The Grade 4 focus group had four interviewees. The Grade 5 focus group had four interviewees. The Grade 6 focus group had three interviewees. These focus groups were grade-level specific, with an intent that interviewees of the same group had similar experiences, so that purposeful discussion could be achieved.

The three focus-group interviews were semi-structured with guiding prompts. The purpose of the guiding questions was to stimulate dialogue among interviewees in a focus group. The interviewees recalled, described, and reflected on their experiences as well as substantiated their stories with evidence. Semi-structured interviews allowed interviewees freedom to express their thoughts and provide parameters for their discussion, thus the collected data were on the topic of research. An interpretivist, Elliott (2012) also used semi-structured interviews as his research design as it allows one to “tell their own stories in their own words with a minimum of structure and constraint (p.66).”

The interviews were audio recorded to create verbatim for the thematic analysis as outlined in the *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All the focus-group interviews were conducted by the main researcher. The main researcher and a second researcher read and coded the transcripts independently. Afterward, they discussed and agreed on the final codes and categories of the data. This practice aims to establish inter-rater reliability of data interpretation.

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Prior to each focus-group interview, interviewees gave their written consent, acknowledging their understanding of this research, agreeing to participate in the interview and giving permission for the audio recording.

### **Validity**

This is insider research which was conducted at the workplace of the researchers. The familiarity of the research field in terms of its context and participants is deemed to be advantageous for this study because collected data can be interpreted with authenticity. Hemmings (2009) recommended that the nature of insider research is beneficial for youth studies, especially with adolescent learners. The trusting relationship between the researchers and the participants facilitates genuine sharing of experiences. It is argued that the participants of this study are minors and consideration of their maturity is critical. When the participants are put at ease because of their familiarity with the researchers, they are likely to share their experiences freely. The relationship between the researchers and the participants can have a positive impact on their willingness to disclose their views. Insider researchers have potential for collecting data which contribute to credible findings.

In order to collect credible data, the interview questions asked for interviewees' experiences, which prevented students from answering with what they thought would please the interviewer. In each focus group, the interviewees engaged themselves in dialogue with each other and the interviewer's main role was to listen, record, and transcribe their conversations. This arrangement was purposeful in managing power-distance among participants and between the interviewer and the interviewees. Participants did not respond directly to the interviewer's questions, but had dialogue with their peers.

Furthermore, inter-rater reliability was achieved with having the two researchers analyze the transcripts. Only those excerpts which were agreed upon by both researchers were classified into codes and categorized into themes. These two researchers are conscious of researcher biases and aim to generate evidence-based interpretations of the subjects. This practice fulfills the ethical and substantive validity of interpretivist qualitative research as outlined by Augen (2000).

### **Results**

Qualitative data in the form of transcripts collected through the focus-group interviews were analyzed thematically. Analysis consisted of (a) affixing codes, (b) sorting the codes by patterns of commonality and differences, and (c) identifying themes. Bernard and Ryan (1998) discussed that text could be analyzed either as an object in and of itself or as a proxy for experience. Text as object of analysis focuses on the linguistic structure and meaning within text and word. Text as proxy for experience focuses on one's perceptions, feeling, knowledge and behavior as embedded in the text. It is argued that English is not the interviewees' first language, and teenagers are often not selective in their

choice of words. Hence, it is deemed appropriate to analyze the transcripts thematically as proxy for experience.

Seven themes were identified from the codes. They were (a) listening, (b) empathy, (c) empathy and healing, (d) awareness, (e) planning: conceptualization and foresight, (f) persuasion, and (g) community building. The theme of awareness was subdivided into purpose, reflection, stewardship, development of self and development of others. The theme of community building was also subdivided into perseverance, teamwork, and relationship. Quotations were selected among the sorted codes as evidence to support the identified themes. Reference to a quotation was indicated with the altered code such as 4p4j.

**Listening.** Listening to others is not only a technique, but an attitude to understand others' needs and interests. The student-leaders guided the primary classes to decide on their service projects with the vision of coming up with a topic collectively as a group. For example, one class focused on the social issue of poverty within the community, another class focused on the treatment of domestic helpers in Hong Kong. One verbatim is:

5p1z: As a class, I discussed with my students in the first class of what the students wanted to do. I gave them a list of social issues in Hong Kong and they created the list themselves, and the hot topic was (domestic) helpers.

**Empathy.** The student-leaders put themselves into the elementary school students' perspective. They looked for ways that appealed to children in order to stir their interests in social issues regarding the community. One verbatim is:

4p4j: You need to think from their perspective, whether they would enjoy this lesson. If they enjoy the lesson, everything that they hear will sort of [be] going into their mind and they actually remember.

**Empathy and Healing.** The student-leaders gradually developed relationships with the young children. They did not only focus on their class's learning about social issues in the community, but also cared about their well-being. They looked for ways to encourage children who were marginalized in the classroom and built them up as individuals. One verbatim quote is:

5p6z: Apparently he was being bullied... I felt very bad for the kid [be]cause I know what it feels like to be excluded... When I come in the room, he smiles and he gets along. He jumps and plays. So, I choose him for everything.

**Awareness.** The student-leaders were able to articulate clearly their roles, objectives of joining the program, and their needs for personal growth. The theme of awareness is

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subdivided into five sub-themes: purpose, reflection, stewardship, commitment to the growth of self, and commitment to the growth of people.

**Purpose.** Student-leaders joined this school co-curricular program with clear purposes in mind. Many of them expressed that they enjoyed working with younger children. Others were interested to conduct service projects in the community. Some of them joined because they wanted to develop their skills set. One verbatim quote is:

4p1j: It would be a very good experience for me to grow and to get the hands on experience to actually teach kids. I was actually planning to study education when I go to university.

**Reflection.** During the year, student-leaders worked in teams. They reflected and shared their success and failure. They planned collaboratively for improvement. Self-awareness and general awareness help the student-leaders to become effective in their interaction with the younger children. Two verbatim quotes are:

5p3d: Every time I go for the class, I try to figure out what method of teaching captures their attention... I am trying to cater them to make an impact.

4p6c: When I teach these students, I realize that I am lacking in these areas and I need to improve myself. I should be more organized, more punctual, and more confidently teaching them about things that we are going to learn.

**Stewardship.** The student-leaders were teachable, accepting feedback, reflective regarding their behaviors, and making corrections as needed. One verbatim quote is:

5p2z: There was a time when I slacked off and my teacher said that I needed to get back on track. I think that she was right. There [is] a lot of work. That's why I join (this school program), to be more responsible, to organize and teach a class.

**Commitment to the growth of self.** The student-leaders stepped out of their comfort zone. They learned new skills, became confident and developed perseverance through various challenges they faced in the program. Personal growth is especially seen in the context of a community, where others' needs and/or support encouraged student-leaders to grow. Three verbatim quotes are:

5p6n: I can definitely say that I can stand crowds now. I can talk in front of them. There is a lot more comfort now.

5p7j: I am involved in so many things. It teaches me to plan out stuff and try to follow the plan as best as I can.

6p41: The confidence you gain from teaching the kids, you can apply it to other daily skills.

**Commitment to the growth of people.** The student-leaders took their responsibilities seriously. They made an effort to deepen the younger children's understanding of social issues. They supported them to take action to address these social issues. One verbatim quote is:

5p1j: I make sure that they understand what a social issue is. They listed out a bunch of social issues for me. I showed them that the basis of these social issues was poverty.

**Planning: Conceptualization and Foresight.** The student-leaders were able to articulate what they wanted to accomplish with the classes by the end of the school year. They learned to make plans for their activities. They were conscious of time as a limited resource. They were able to guide younger children to complete their set goals. Two verbatim quotes are:

4p2j: We want to teach them that the process of growing a plant takes hard work. When we waste food, it's like throwing away all the hard work that people did for when they produced food. We just want them to know that we can't take food for granted.

5p5d: It is good to plan ahead. I started to look online and asked other people for help. I asked people who were in this program last year. There is a student who is autistic. I asked my dad (for advice because) he works with autistic people.

**Persuasion.** The student-leaders tried to use various activities to ignite the younger children's interest and engagement. They persuaded others to accept their suggestion and gave opportunities for others to contribute their input to the project. One verbatim quote is:

5p2j: At first, they wouldn't think of buying things for other people just to give away and not getting anything [back]. I try to teach them that they don't need something in return to do something good. We played this simulation. We used that to spur out emotion... They were the ones who came up with this idea. [At the end,] we donated the food to [a charity].

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**Community Building.** The student-leaders served and led groups of primary students in various service projects within their local community. The theme of community building is subdivided into three sub-themes: perseverance, teamwork, and relationship.

**Perseverance.** One aspect of community building is the quality of perseverance. As crucial as planning goes, so is perseverance. The founder of the service learning program had a vision, and her passion was contagious. A few learners were curious, joined the program, and learned to persevere with her in this journey. Community building requires ongoing perseverance. One verbatim quote is:

6p5a: I would never [have] thought of this as a program to start off with. The first few months I thought that was not going to work. She persisted [in] it! Personally, it makes me more confident that I can start something.

**Teamwork.** Community building can be a daunting task, but it becomes less intimidating through collaboration and putting their strength together. Student-leaders built meaningful working relationships in their team. One verbatim quote is:

4p5c: We share our strategies. Also inspiration. We get each other tips. We come together and talk about it. We know where everybody is at. We can keep everybody in the same level, or around.

**Relationship.** The relationship between the student-leaders and the young children extended beyond the classrooms. This co-curricular program facilitated students across grades to interact with one another. A healthy community is a place where social interactions flourish. Two verbatim quotes are:

4p6s: Every time I see my kids walking in the hallway, they say “Hi” and I feel so proud of them.

5p7j: When I see them in the library, they always come up to me and say “Hi”. They tell me about their stuff and I like talking to them.

Overall, the purpose of this empirical study is to explore a possible pathway to cultivate servant leadership qualities among learners in secondary schooling. The results of this study showed that the co-curricular program provided opportunities for learners to develop the attributes of servant leaders. The following section discusses a possible training framework for servant leadership development in learners of secondary schools.

## DISCUSSION

The ten essential characteristics as identified by Spears (2010) are: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and community building. With a growth mindset

and teachable attitude, learners can cultivate these traits through cycles of discussion, practice, and reflection. Repetition helps adolescent learners to develop habits and support their character formation. These traits are categorized into three progressive stages of (I) serving, (II) leading, and (III) building. Table 1 presents a re-organization of Spears’ ten characteristics of a servant leader into a framework of servant leadership training for adolescent learners.

Table 1:  
Matching Spears’ Servant Leader Attributes with Chan and So’s Framework of Servant Leadership Development for Adolescent Learners

Spears’ ten characteristics of a servant leader	Chan and So’s framework of servant leadership development
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Listening</li> <li>2. Empathy</li> <li>3. Healing</li> <li>4. Awareness</li> <li>5. Persuasion</li> <li>6. Conceptualization</li> <li>7. Foresight</li> <li>8. Stewardship</li> <li>9. Commitment to the growth of people</li> <li>10. Building community</li> </ol>	(I) Serving <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening</li> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Healing</li> </ul>
	(II) Leading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Stewardship</li> <li>○ Commitment to the growth of people</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Planning                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Foresight</li> <li>○ Conceptualization</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Persuasion</li> </ul>
	(III) Building <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community</li> </ul>

**Stage 1: Serving**

Learners serve through listening to others, expressing empathy for others, and bringing healing to others. Listening is an expression of interest to know more about others and their context. Through listening, learners are able to put themselves into others’ shoes, empathizing the others’ thinking and feeling. Empathy motivates the learners to look for opportunities to bring acceptance and healing. Healing comes in many forms. From the research results, it can be words of encouragement and appreciation. It can be equipping others with new knowledge and skills. It can be paying attention and spending time with others.



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### **Stage 2: Leading**

A servant leader is first one who supports the whole group. The lead component of the servant leadership discussion with learners begins with self-awareness of their inner voice and the purpose for leadership, based on servant leadership philosophy and values. In order to lead well, learners need to be stewards of their time, energy, talents and resources, for the betterment of others. Learners should be actively seeking their own growth and supporting others' growth.

Subsequently, learners can be given training on developing plans. They learn to examine their tasks conceptually, anticipate pitfalls and develop a timeline to build parts into a whole. The habit of planning ahead helps learners to become responsible stewards.

Furthermore, learners need to know that a servant leader is assertive, but not aggressive. A servant leader does not force an idea on others, but persuades others to be open-minded and take risks in trying out new methods and ideas despite risks that may be involved. Even when facing objection and/or obstacles, a servant leader perseveres and develops resilience. It is important to know that followers do not accept a servant leader's advice because of his/her debating technique, but his/her genuine care and relational authority.

Most importantly, servant leadership is a lifestyle. A servant leader leads by role modeling. The best persuasion is to impact life with life. When a leader walks the talk, he/she earns the followers' respect and they emulate their servant leader.

### **Stage 3: Building**

From an emergent to a veteran servant leader, one grows in his/her sense of responsibility for his/her community. This requires the learners to practice all the traits in the serve and lead stages. They may fail, but they learn through their struggles. The mentoring and training from teachers, teamwork with peers, and the responsiveness and enthusiasm from the community members form a supportive network which motivate, encourage, and affirm the servant leaders in their journey of growth. The outcomes of building community are to (a) support the diversity of individuals in a community; (b) facilitate individuals of a community to form supportive networks; and (c) celebrate collective success instead of competition for the fittest.

Overall, the three stages of servant leadership training are categorized with the actions of serve, lead, and build. Through cycles of discussion, practice, and reflection, learners in secondary schools build servant leadership habits. Schools may follow this framework to cultivate servant leaders among learners.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, this empirical study presents evidence of learners' experiences in serving others and their communities during a co-curricular program. The authors advocate that servant leadership is a framework for character education of learners in secondary schools. The philosophy of servant leadership as well as the values and attributes of a servant leader should be incorporated in education and leadership development of adolescents in schools. This can be accomplished through purposeful curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular design.

Our education system needs to look beyond global ranking and curriculum reform. Our education system needs an awakening and noble challenge: to cultivate learners as responsive and responsible servant leaders, who serve and lead in their community, with the motive of benefitting those who are served to become "healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants" (Greenleaf, 1970, p.13).

### Suggestions for Future Research

Research on servant leadership development among learners in secondary schooling is lacking. A framework of training servant leaders in secondary schools is presented in this paper. An implementation of this framework and collection of learners' experiences through reflective journals would validate and further develop this idea.

Furthermore, Chan (2016) argued that a servant leader has a growth mindset and develops his/her capacity to serve others. A servant leader perseveres over challenges when he/she works and walks with others along the learning journey. The practice of servant leadership in a learning community cultivates learners with resilience and a growth mindset. Hence, it is possible that learners in secondary schools, who are exposed to servant leadership qualities and have opportunities to practice servant leadership, develop a growth mindset and grit (Duckworth, 2015). It is beneficial to further research the outcomes of servant leadership training in learners of other secondary schooling as well as the impacts this type of program has in the development of youth leaders post-graduation.

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