

Integrating Servant Leadership and Coaching: Toward Transformative Educational Leadership in A Faith-Based School Board in Surabaya

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how servant leadership is enacted through coaching within a Christian school board in Surabaya. While servant leadership is widely upheld in faith-based education, its integration with coaching remains underexamined. This research addresses three questions: (1) how school leaders understand coaching as part of servant leadership, (2) how they practice it, and (3) what enables its implementation. Employing a qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews with ten school leaders and analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) framework. Findings reveal that servant leadership coaching (SLC) is shaped by leaders' inner convictions, especially their sense of divine calling and belief that leading means helping. SLC emerges as a holistic practice encompassing spiritual formation, personal care, and professional development. However, effective implementation depends on two enabling factors: (1) training that builds coaching competence and trustworthiness, and (2) school policies that institutionalize SLC formally while also allowing it to flourish organically. These findings expand existing SLC models by emphasizing vocational identity, relational integrity, and organizational culture as key elements. This study offers a faith-integrated servant leadership coaching in Christian schools, positioning coaching as an effective servant leadership enactment.

INTRODUCTION

Schools are entrusted with not only academic instruction but also the holistic development of students for life. In Indonesia, this vision aligns with Pancasila's first principle, "Belief in the One and Only God," which legally supports the establishment of faith-based schools. Christian schools have played a vital role in the Indonesian education system for over seventy years (Gunawan, 2012; Rohi, 2021). These institutions aim to shape students not just intellectually, but also spiritually and morally forming character through a faith-infused educational mission.

Despite their legacy, Christian schools in Indonesia face growing challenges. They are often perceived as exclusive and expensive (Kristiawan, 2014), while public schools and new private competitors are expanding with innovative models. In this saturated landscape, Christian schools must differentiate themselves not merely through curriculum but through transformative leadership that aligns with their spiritual identity.

Servant leadership is widely embraced in Christian education as a model that reflects the teachings of Jesus—prioritizing the growth of others, especially the struggling or vulnerable (Greenleaf, 1977; Sendjaya, 2015; Kristianto, 2020). Leaders in faith-based schools are expected to serve not as authoritative figures but as shepherds who disciple, restore, and empower their communities. However, translating the spirit of servant leadership into daily leadership practices remains a challenge.

One compelling way servant leadership can be enacted is through coaching—intentional, relational, and empowering conversations that foster growth. Coaching aligns naturally with servant leadership's ethos but is often viewed as difficult and time-consuming. Many school leaders agree with its value yet struggle with its implementation, especially when dealing with complex spiritual, personal, and professional issues. Coaching requires emotional labor, time, and skill, making it demanding in already burdened school environments.

Despite its potential, the integration of servant leadership and coaching, known as servant leadership coaching (SLC), remains underexplored in leadership literature. While coaching has been extensively studied and practiced across sectors (e.g., Whitmore, 2009; Knight, 2007; Aguilar, 2013), research that

explicitly connects coaching with servant leadership principles is still emerging. Saddiq and van Dierendonck (2021) are among the few who have developed framework and measurement tools to conceptualize SLC, yet their work also notes the limited empirical studies validating the practice in educational contexts. Compared to the rich discourse on either coaching or servant leadership alone, integrated studies on SLC remain scarce and deserve further investigation. This study explores how servant leadership is expressed through coaching within a Christian school board in Surabaya, which oversees ten schools ranging from kindergarten to senior high school. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent do school leaders understand coaching as part of servant leadership?
2. To what extent have they practiced coaching in their leadership roles?
3. What are the enabling factors to implement servant leadership coaching?

By answering these questions, this study contributes both theoretical insight into the underdeveloped area of servant leadership coaching and practical guidance for faith-based schools seeking to nurture spiritually grounded leadership through coaching.

Servant Leadership

The concept of servant leadership was first popularized by Robert K. Greenleaf (1977), who argued that true leadership begins with the desire to serve others. For Greenleaf, a servant leader prioritizes the needs and development of followers, aiming to foster their growth into individuals who, in turn, serve others—thus transforming society through a cascading model of service. Building on this foundational idea, Spears (1995) identified ten core characteristics of servant leadership, such as listening, empathy, stewardship, and commitment to the growth of people. These traits offer a behavioral framework for servant leadership and have been applied across various sectors, including education.

In his Netherlands context leadership study, van Dierendonck (2011) emphasized servant leadership as a multidimensional construct that includes humility, empowerment, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship. His work highlights the relational and ethical components of servant leadership while proposing more measurable dimensions suitable for empirical research. However, both Spears and van Dierendonck, while comprehensive, tend to treat servant leadership primarily as a set of competencies or behaviors. In contrast, Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) critiqued these models for neglecting the spiritual foundation of servant leadership, particularly in Christian contexts. They proposed that servant leadership is not merely a method or technique, but a calling rooted in theological and anthropological convictions. Sendjaya et al. (2019) developed a validated model that integrates both inward transformation and outward service through six dimensions: voluntary subordination, authentic self, covenantal relationship, responsible morality, transcendental spirituality, and transforming influence.

Given the spiritual and formational goals of Christian education, this study adopts Sendjaya’s framework. His model resonates strongly with the theological vision of leadership as discipleship and aligns with the mission of faith-based schools to nurture both character and competence. Unlike models that emphasize behavioral traits or secular ethics alone, Sendjaya’s framework captures the holistic, spiritual, and relational nature of servant leadership, making it especially appropriate for exploring how Christian school leaders practice coaching as an embodiment of their servant-leadership identity.

Attitude towards Servant Leadership

Attitude toward servant leadership refers to a leader’s internalized disposition to place others’ needs above their own, grounded not in strategy but in sincere motivation to serve. In general psychology, attitude comprises cognitive, affective, and behavioral tendencies toward a particular idea or practice (Ajzen, 1991). Applied to leadership, this suggests that a servant leader is not only aware of servant leadership concepts but is genuinely committed to embodying them in practice.

Van Dierendonck (2011) conceptualizes servant leadership as a combination of humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship—traits that reflect an inner readiness to serve rather than dominate. However, Sendjaya et al. (2019) expand this by anchoring servant leadership in Christian theological anthropology. Their six-dimensional model frames servant leadership as an identity, not just a behavior: voluntary subordination, authentic self, covenantal relationship, responsible morality, transcendental spirituality, and transforming influence.

The attitude toward servant leadership in this study is understood as the leader's internal commitment to six core dimensions proposed by Sendjaya et al. (2019), which together reflect a holistic servant identity. Voluntary subordination describes the leader's conscious choice to serve others rather than seek power or control and authentic self-highlights integrity leading from one's true values rather than pretense (Sendjaya, 2015). Covenantal relationships emphasize deep, trust-based connections marked by acceptance and mutual respect and responsible morality refers to ethical discernment, where leaders prioritize doing what is right, not merely what is effective (Sendjaya, 2015). Transcendental spirituality for Sendjaya (2015) points to a sense of calling—seeing leadership as a divine vocation with eternal significance and transforming influence captures the leader's desire to nurture followers toward holistic growth—spiritually, personally, and professionally.

Servant Leadership Coaching

Coaching has become a key approach in educational leadership, offering a shift from evaluative supervision to empowering dialogue. Defined by Whitmore (2009) as “unlocking a person's potential,” coaching fosters autonomy, reflection, and growth. Scholars such as Knight (2007), Aguilar (2013), and Robertson (2008) highlight its role in building trust, instructional improvement, and professional culture when embedded within leadership practices. When integrated with servant leadership, coaching takes on a deeper moral and spiritual dimension. Servant Leadership Coaching (SLC) is not merely about performance outcomes, but about the ethical and relational growth of the follower. Saddiq and van Dierendonck (2021) advanced this integration by identifying five relationally grounded coaching dimensions: authentic engagement, empowerment, helping others grow, ethical behavior, and stewardship. These align closely with Greenleaf's original vision of leadership as service and dignity, now contextualized within coaching relationships.

Recent developments by Halawi and van Dierendonck (2025) further deepen the concept of SLC by proposing it as a distinct form of executive coaching tailored for servant leaders. Unlike traditional coaching that emphasizes outcomes or competencies, their 2025 model focuses on three spiritually aligned aims: *personal transformation*, *ethical and moral development*, and *service orientation*. This shift reflects a stronger emphasis on inner formation rather than mere skills, making the model especially relevant for Christian schools.

In faith-based schools, where leadership is seen as ministry, SLC provides a framework for coaching that cultivates identity and calling. It positions school leaders not only as instructional guides, but also as spiritual shepherds who cultivate environments rooted in grace, trust, and shared purpose. By treating staff and students as image-bearers of God (cf. Mark 10:45), servant leadership coaching becomes a formational practice—mutually shaping both coach and follower through prayerful reflection and shared learning.

Servant Leadership Coaching Training

Effective servant leadership coaching requires more than technical know-how—it demands deep alignment with ethical, spiritual, and developmental values (van Dierendonck, 2021). Training must therefore move beyond methods, focusing instead on cultivating self-awareness, moral discernment, relational maturity, and spiritual depth. Without this foundation, coaching risks becoming transactional rather than transformational (Robertson, 2008).

Halawi and van Dierendonck (2025) emphasize that SLC training should integrate personal formation with relational competence. This includes developing reflective habits, grounding in theological concepts of servanthood, and the ability to create safe, trust-filled environments. Especially in Christian schools, where leadership is a form of ministry, training must help leaders embrace their calling to guide others not just professionally, but also spiritually and morally.

When done well, SLC training equips leaders to coach with empathy, lead with integrity, and reflect the servant-hearted leadership modeled by Christ (cf. John 13:14–15).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework that integrates the concepts of servant leadership identity, coaching as leadership enactment, and the role of developmental training in educational leadership. At its core, the research draws upon the multidimensional servant leadership model developed by Sendjaya et al. (2019), which conceptualizes servant leadership not merely as a set of behaviors, but as an identity

shaped by six core dimensions: *voluntary subordination, authentic self, covenantal relationship, responsible morality, transcendental spirituality, and transforming influence*. These dimensions represent the internal commitments of a servant leader, forming what this study defines as the leader’s attitude toward servant leadership—the independent variable in this research.

This inner disposition is hypothesized to shape how leaders enact their leadership through coaching, specifically within the framework of Servant Leadership Coaching (SLC). The SLC construct is informed by Halawi and van Dierendonck (2025), who reconceptualize coaching as a form of transformational, value-based practice tailored to servant leaders. Their model emphasizes three key outcomes of SLC: *personal transformation, ethical and moral development, and service orientation*—which together constitute the dependent variable of this study.

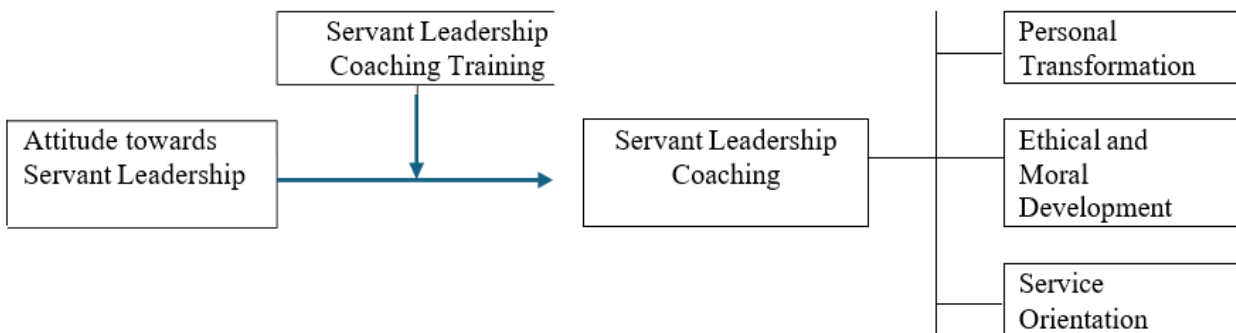


Figure 1. Theoretical framework (adapted from Van Dierendonck and Halawi, 2025)

In addition, this framework recognizes the importance of training for servant leadership coaching as a developmental mechanism. Drawing on both van Dierendonck (2021) and Robertson (2008), the model suggests that effective implementation of SLC depends not only on intrinsic attitude but also on the leader’s coaching competence, which is cultivated through structured, reflective, and relationally grounded training processes.

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions, the researcher employed qualitative research methods by conducting semi-structured interviews with ten school leaders under the case school board. These participants served as headmasters or headmistresses across various educational levels—kindergarten, primary, and junior high—within a Christian school system in Surabaya. They were selected based on their formal leadership roles and direct involvement in both academic and organizational decision-making.

To maintain confidentiality, all participants have been anonymized using generic pseudonyms (Leader-1 to Leader-10), unrelated to their names, initials, or school identities. Their leadership experience varied in both length and context, with ages ranging from early 40s to late 50s. Most held bachelor or master degrees and collectively represented a diverse leadership sample across the school board’s institutional landscape. The interviews focused on exploring three core areas: (1) attitudes toward servant leadership, (2) practices of servant leadership coaching, and (3) training needs to support coaching effectiveness.

The data collected were analyzed using the qualitative framework outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves three iterative and interconnected phases: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the first phase, transcripts were reviewed, coded, and categorized to identify emerging patterns. These categories were then organized into narrative summaries and visual matrices to aid interpretation. In the final phase, the researcher engaged in reflective analysis to triangulate insights, verify meaning, and draw conclusions that address the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Through the process of qualitative data analysis as outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), three overarching themes emerged from the data: attitude towards servant leadership, servant leadership coaching aspects, training and school policy as enabling factors of servant leadership coaching.

Attitude Toward Servant Leadership: Calling and Identity

In relation to the attitude of the leaders toward servant leadership, school leaders regard servant leadership as leadership that must be done as an approach to lead even if it is normal to use command and control. One head teacher said how she felt when she had to deal with teachers under her leadership that have committed repetitive mistakes.

“...I believe that every teacher as my follower especially the ones who keep on making a mistake or got into trouble are the ones who need help. These are teachers who did not report the report card meticulously. These teachers kept making the same mistake. I could just use reward and punishment approach, but I believe that they need help and must be assisted in some way. Despite their mistakes and troubles, as their leader, I view them as followers who need help” (Leader-1, Interview)”

The conviction above confirms that servant leadership has been the attitude of the leader when she must lead her followers who have not performed well repeatedly. Another understanding of the significance of servant leadership is that leadership be it as a school leader or a teacher is based on the calling of the teacher. Another school leader shared her opinion is like the following:

“...It is important that every leader and even every teacher in this school to be based his or her leadership or employment on the calling based on their faith. The calling will make them a different teacher. When he or she teaches, it is based on the mentality to serve their students. This personal calling should be the basis for these teachers to be committed or to keep on doing servant leadership. The calling is expected to ensure that the servant leadership or servant teachership is being done sincerely and not because of the organizational policy” (Leader-3, Interview).

The school leaders regard servant leadership as a leadership approach that must be done given the identity of the school, but they also suggest that as a leadership approach that is identity driven, servant leadership should be done based on the conviction that these leaders were being called by God. This attitude towards servant leadership that is based on organizational identity and personal calling has given the indication as the driver for servant leadership coaching.

Servant Leadership Coaching Aspects

In relation to servant leadership coaching, many teachers suggest coaching itself is important but at the same time difficult. A head teacher of one of the senior high schools explained:

“...I am pretty sure that nobody in this school would disagree with coaching as a practice of servant leadership. However, coaching is very demanding. Many leaders immediately felt that they must go through person-to-person meetings and not only are willing to listen to the followers but also be ready with whatever that might come out from those personalized sessions. Practically it is about time, The latest government regulation requires every teacher that already has his or her non education S-1 degree, to take another S-1 degree in education. On top of that, let’s just say we have the time, I don’t really know what to do or how to follow up concerns or issues that should be ‘solved’ out of the coaching session” (Leader 2, Interview).

The evidence about suggests that coaching is both important and difficult and when being explored what does it mean by difficult, a head mistress of a junior high school stated the following:

“...one of the teachers under me explain to me her difficulties where she has been unable to perform well; coming on time, contributive during meetings and being resourceful during his classes because of his personal matter. She should deal with the fact that her family’s financial needs cannot be met because her husband has been out of work due to the Covid-19. Her husband was forced to be a rider of an app-based ride hailing service. She was forced to be a private teacher and she was not happy with her husband for not trying hard enough to bring money into her family” (Leader-5, Interview).

The story told the educational leader is one of the pieces of evidence that coaching means dealing with the personal and professional matter of the followers. Coaching as one of the enactments of servant leadership is proven to be a case of spiritual matter where things that happen at school should be viewed from the spiritual perspective. A head teacher shared how she solved a cheating case using a case.

“...last year I dealt with a cheating case where five students cheated on their exam. They were caught and then I called them one by one and thankfully they were willingly admitting their misconduct. However, this means the punishment of this case meant the students will get a zero mark which potentially led him to repeat the whole year of even left the school. I prayed to God and eventually decided where I asked the students to admit in public and then plea for being given the chance. I remembered the case of prodigal son and eventually confirmed the students that they were remorseful and being given the second chance. I saw

that as the chance to teach my students on God's grace or forgiveness." (Leader-6, Interview)

Servant leadership coaching in the schools under the case board is not just about personal matter and professional matter. Servant leaders coach because they want their followers to experience spiritual growth, and this is in line with Sendjaya's (2015) transcendental spirituality where leaders put meaning in their personal and professional work. This shows again that coaching has given the chance for the servant leaders to touch the core aspect of their followers. The impact of servant leadership that can reach the spiritual level of the followers requires coaching ability of the servant leader.

Training and School Policy as the Enabling Factors of Servant leadership coaching

This study found that servant leadership coaching (SLC) training is a primary enabling factor that empowers school leaders to practice coaching meaningfully. However, participants also emphasized that school policy plays a vital complementary role, ensuring that coaching is not only possible, but also culturally and structurally supported within the institution.

Training for Servant Leadership Coaching

The school leaders agree that to conduct coaching that improve the spiritual, personal and professional skills of the followers, they need to have the coaching ability. The ability to coach can be trained but the training is unlike other abilities where this kind of coaching ability should be done through mentoring. One of the heads of an elementary school under the case school board said:

"...the training related to coaching for servant leaders cannot be done by a big seminar. It is like servant leadership; it is no longer about telling the knowledge of servant leadership and coaching. It is about learning through the experience. I imagine it will be like practice in coaching. Practice means how to make the client comfortable, ask the right question and to listen to his or her story. On top of that practicality, it is about how to process or to follow up the data. I meant, what should I do after I heard all problems poured by the client in the coaching session" (Leader-2, Interview)

It is apparent that servant leaders demand training to make them able to coach. The ability of coaching is about the pre-meeting coaching, the conversational process and the after the meeting process. Furthermore, the school leaders also mentioned that the training is also about commitment to integrity related to keeping the story of the client. One head of an elementary school mentioned:

"...there was a case where when I tried to understand my follower, this follower was reluctant to open herself. She eventually shared that she was traumatized by her former leader leaking out her story. The thing is... it was not being done explicitly but somehow everybody knows. I guess it is human nature to just gossip about others. It is difficult to build relationships with others, and sometimes, there will be a case where a follower asked you not to share with others this follower's story. However, funny enough, this follower is the one who shared it with others both consciously and 'unconsciously'. (Leader-2, Interview).

The statement above highlights the importance of trust concerning confidentiality. Coaching in servant leadership requires both the coach and the client to be trustworthy when they share or listen to confidential matters.

School Policy for Servant Leadership Coaching

School leaders under the school board case agree that school policy is needed to make servant leadership as a culture both in leading others and in teaching. They believe that this can be done through the school policy. One elementary school leader expressed it in the following evidence.

"...I think it is a necessity that the school makes it clear about the 'legality' of servant leadership. This will make every leader and hopefully every follower learn more about it and will be ready to do so...ehm, so that for the followers to be ready when they are being asked to come to the office. Many of them felt that they must have done something wrong to be called by their leader." (Leader-2, Interview).

The organizational status of servant leadership is not without any cautious as one leader who is in charge for a junior high school said:

"...I wish servant leadership is an approach that will be shared leadership approach where even without a 'black on white' on the website of the school. I meant, servant leadership needs sincerity and sometimes I felt that a leader might serve just because of the policy or regulation. I think, the policy of the school should be done in such a way that everybody is serving out of their heart and not because of fear..." (Leader-5, Interview)

The evidence above confirmed the meaning of a school policy where the policy should be about the

commitment of the school to enact servant leadership, and the policy should foster the servant leadership sincerity to ensure its effectiveness. Besides the policy, concerning the learning process by the students, the leaders also expect that the meaningful servant leadership will also influence the parents. One of the leaders of a kindergarten school stated:

“...coaching as one of the enactments of servant leadership should be supported by the parents or guardians of the students. Decreasing selfishness cannot be done by the school only. They need to see their parents in doing so. However, I also realize that parents don’t really understand or don’t really buy into servant leadership. They are more into the new curriculum, how to deal with game addiction etc. On one hand, I do realize that servant parentship is urgently needed, but I don’t know how my school can let the parents know its necessity despite practical needs they have, like international curriculum...”. (Leader-9, Interview).

The previous evidence confirms that parents’ involvement is needed to shape the servant leadership sincerity or meaningful servant leadership. This means the school policy is not just fostering culture of servant leadership the teachers, but also about involving parents in the journey to transform the students to be servant leaders.

The themes generated along with their connections stated in the evidence have enabled the researcher to propose a school leadership coaching for a faith-based school in the following.

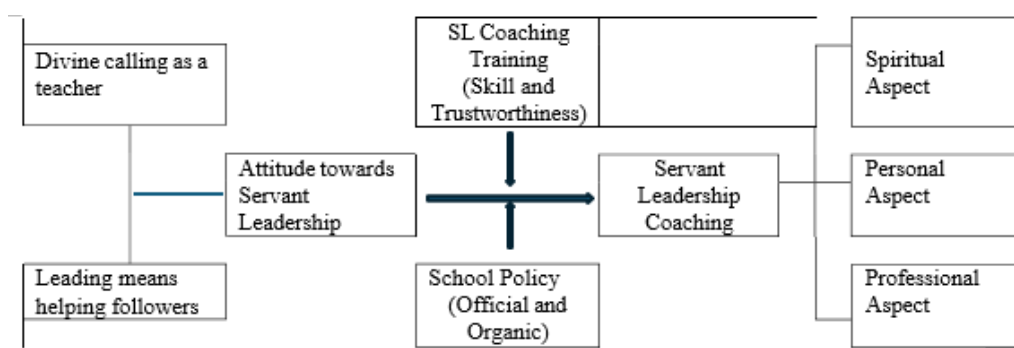


Figure 2. Servant leadership coaching for faith-based school framework

While this study affirms the foundational theoretical framework proposed by Halawi and van Dierendonck (2025), which positions *attitude toward servant leadership* as a central factor influencing servant leadership coaching (SLC), it successfully expands the model in several key areas. The original framework emphasizes the moral and transformational orientation of SLC, particularly through the outcomes of personal transformation, ethical development, and service orientation. However, findings from this study reveal that in the context of Christian schools, the *attitude toward servant leadership* is shaped not only by internal ethical conviction, but also by a deeper theological grounding, namely a sense of divine calling in education and the belief that leading means helping followers. These themes correspond with the *transcendental spirituality* and *covenantal relationship* dimensions of Sendjaya’s (2015) servant leadership model, affirming that servant leadership in faith-based schools is inherently spiritual, relational, and vocational in nature.

In addition, while the original framework views SLC as producing personal and ethical outcomes, this study broadens the understanding of SLC as a multidimensional process that addresses the *spiritual, personal, and professional* aspects of both leaders and followers. This expansion is supported by participant narratives that describe coaching not merely as performance-driven development, but as a spiritually formative journey—one that touches the heart, character, and competence of those involved. Furthermore, this study identifies two enabling factors critical for the actualization of SLC: SLC training and school policy. Training, as suggested by van Dierendonck (2021), is essential; however, this research refines that claim by showing that training must cultivate not only coaching skills but also *trustworthiness of the coach* and relational credibility that legitimizes the coaching relationship. Additionally, school policy is found to be a crucial structural enabler, with effective implementation requiring both official endorsement and organic adoption. Leaders expressed the need for policies that not only authorize coaching practices but also inspire voluntary engagement—aligning with Eva et al.’s (2019) emphasis that servant leadership must arise from intrinsic motivation rather than institutional compulsion.

This emphasis on formation is echoed by Iskandar and Tanzil (2024), who in their research on dealing with agnostic students argue that Christian educators must adopt a nuanced and empathetic approach to address their spiritual, emotional, and psychological needs. The integration of SLC as a holistic framework supports this view, positioning coaching not merely as leadership technique, but as an act of discipleship rooted in Christ-centered character and calling.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored how school leaders within a Christian educational context understand and implement servant leadership coaching (SLC). Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Sendjaya et al. (2019), van Dierendonck (2021), and Halawi & van Dierendonck (2025), this research confirms that attitude toward servant leadership plays a foundational role in shaping leaders’ engagement with coaching. However, the findings indicate that this internal disposition alone is not sufficient. For SLC to be practiced meaningfully, it must be supported by two enabling factors: training that builds both skill and trustworthiness, and school policies that legitimize coaching both officially and organically. When these conditions are met, servant leadership coaching emerges as a transformative practice that addresses followers’ spiritual, personal, and professional formation.

This study offers several key novelties. First, it expands the understanding of *attitude toward servant leadership* by showing that, in Christian schools, this attitude is deeply rooted in a sense of divine calling and a belief that leading means helping themes not fully emphasized in prior frameworks. Second, it reconceptualizes the outcomes of SLC not merely as personal and ethical, but as a threefold transformation of the spiritual, personal, and professional self. Third, it refines existing literature on coaching training by emphasizing not only competence, but relational trustworthiness as a vital dimension, echoing the importance of spiritual credibility in faith-based leadership. Lastly, it highlights the dual role of school policy—as both structural scaffolding and cultural enabler—in supporting authentic, heart-driven coaching practice.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing literature on servant leadership in educational settings by bridging theological and leadership perspectives in a coherent model of faith-integrated coaching. It supports the view that coaching is not just a technique, but a manifestation of one’s servant identity. Practically, the study offers faith-based schools a framework for developing leadership cultures that go beyond accountability systems and into deep formation through coaching that reflects the character, humility, and mission of Christ.

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