The effect of servant leadership on students' engagement in social studies class: analyzing perception of middle school students in Dubai

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Abstract

One of the most important goals of education for students is to learn. By engaging students in the classroom they can reach this essential aim. By adopting appropriate leadership styles, teachers can increase students' learning, for example adopting a servant leadership style helps teachers to coach students to enrich their learning experiences. The main purpose of this study is to evaluate the extent to which servant teaching influences students' engagement in Dubai's middle schools. Based on a positivist approach, quantitative data was collected from a sample of 383 students from four middle schools in Dubai using SES-4DS and modified version of the seven-factor servant leadership scale Questionnaire. Linear Regression was used for analyzing the results. The finding shows that the use servant leadership style by social studies teachers influence learners engagement on three different aspects: cognitive, behavioral and agency. Findings of this research can be used by teachers to apply servant leadership in their classroom. Application of this leadership style in classroom helps students to engage more and therefore learn better.

Key words: servant leadership, student engagement

Introduction

The essential requirement of students in the schools is learning. Engagement is one of the main elements of enhancing this importance requirement (Deci et al. 1991). Some educators believe that one of the biggest challenges faced by teachers is to keep students' engaged in the classroom (Harris 2007). Statistics show that approximately between 25 (Willms 2003) to more than 60 percent of students are counted as disengaged (Cothran & Ennis 2000). As teachers are known as classroom leaders (Chory & Mc Croskey 1999), different leadership behavior of them can differently

impact on students' learning (Noland & Richards 2014). Most of the researches in this area concentrated on transformational leadership, while servant leadership also is an influential type to be applied in the classroom (Noland & Richards 2015).

The main purpose of this quantitative study is to investigate if servant teaching influences on students' engagement in schools in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. According to the point that findings of some studies based on students' viewpoint show that social studies is counted as a boring course for them, focus of this research would be on social studies classes only (Schug et al. 1984; Shaughnessy & Haladyana, 1985 cited by Heafner 2004). Due to the results of studies on the middle school social classes, many students tend to be behaviorally and academically disengaged in their classrooms (Fin 1993). A survey done by Willms, Friesen, and Milton (2009) indicates that students are interested in having deeper relationship with their teachers and community; this two ways relationship increases their engagement (Taylor & Parsons 2011). Engagement should be studied as a multilayered concept comprising emotional, behavioral and cognitive aspects (Fredricks et al. 2004). Recently, agency, as a new dimension of engagement also is recognized to be as important as the factors mentioned above (Reeve & Tseng 2011).

Macpherson, Kachelhoffer and El Nemr (2007) in their article cited to a report published in Al-Ittihad newspaper about modernizing schools and educational leadership in United Arab Emirates (UAE). One of the points in this report is about inconveniency of teachers in their relationship and loyalty toward their students. Besides, one of the points that Ministry of Education in the UAE emphasizes on, is school improvement plan for development in leadership of school communities (cited in Macpherson et al. 2007). Purpose of servant leadership is to serve, and build strong relationship and support for students (Noland & Richards 2015). Accordingly, servant leadership seems appropriate to be implemented in the UAE schools.

It is argued that all of the school personnel according to their area of expertise should contribute in leadership task (Thurston et al. 1995). Pounder and her colleagues (1995) believe that teacher leadership is as effective as principal leadership for the schools. The focus of the recent literature is on the link between certain leadership practice of teachers and students' outcome. Outcome covers different issues like

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learning and motivation (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2010; Bolkan, Goodby, & Griffin, 2011; Noland & Richards, 2014; Pounder, 2003, 2006). A teacher as a servant leader of the classroom should give priority to students and serving them (Doraiswamy 2013 cited in Hays 2008).

Based on the view point of Hays (2008), by expanding theory of servant leadership (Greenleaf 1977) to teaching, it can help address disengagement problem and consequently raise students' learning. Therefore, this paper in general, would follow the alternative hypothesis that servant leadership affect students' engagement in social studies classes in Dubai.

Seven dimensions of servant leadership (Liden et al. 2008) that is a practical approach to servant leadership theory (Greenleaf 1970) shapes the theoretical framework of this study. The significant of this research is to investigate the effect of servant teaching as a holistic factor on each components of engagement separately in middle schools' social studies classes. Bliss (2006) argues that there is a gap in literature about practice of servant leadership by teachers. This study provides suitable information for filling the gap in current literature about teachers' practice of servant leadership in Dubai middle school classrooms.

The general objective of this research is to evaluate students' perception regarding the effect of servant leadership on their engagement. In particular, would analyze the impact of servant leadership on students' emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and agency engagement. This paper is designed in five parts: literature review, research method, data analysis, discussion and conclusion. Questionnaires were distributed in four schools in Dubai. Linear Regression is used for analyzing data to predict the effect of servant leadership as a holistic component on each engagement aspects. This study would answer the following research questions:
- To what extend does servant leadership affect students' engagement in middle school social studies classes in Dubai?
- To what extend does servant leadership affect emotional engagement of middle school students in social studies classes in Dubai?
- To what extend does servant leadership affect cognitive engagement of middle school students in social studies class in Dubai?

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- To what extend does servant leadership affect behavioral engagement of middle school students in social studies class in Dubai?
- To what extend does servant leadership affect agency engagement of middle school students in social studies class in Dubai?

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Servant Teaching

Servant leadership is recognized by Greenleaf (1970) and is a leadership style that is mainly based on the idea of building trust in organization (Liden et al. 2008). Main focus of this type of leadership is on followers' improvement (Noland & Richards 2015) and serving them (Greenleaf 1997). In servant leadership, leaders should discover and emphasize on followers' talents, potentials, desires, needs and interests. Leader's responsibility is to look for individuals' unique characteristics and to encourage them via raising level of their self-confident (Lord et al. 1999). One application of servant leadership is in education (Spears 1996).

Teachers have essential role in school improvement (Spillane & Diamond 2007). Teacher leader should make a learning community whit an affective climate where students can trust each other and be respected, where communications are open and all students feel equal (Mitchell 1999; Mitchell & Sackney 2000). Accordingly, teachers can act as servant leaders of classrooms. Addressing students' weaknesses and helping them to overcome them is an important side of servant leaders' duty (Jennings et al. 2003). When followers trust and believe their leader in a learning community, would be encouraged to take risk and engage easier (Schoorman et al. 2007).

Greenleaf (1977) counts teachers as servant leaders when focusing on serving first. Teacher as servant leader should focus on developing students and coaching them to form their own learning experiences (Metzer 2008). Teacher as a servant leader tries to concentrate on interactive and liberating aspects of education rather than its one-way relationship (Hays 2008). Teaching necessary skills and knowledge for students' success is a crucial responsibility of teachers as servant leaders in the class. They also need to build a sense of belonging for students in the classroom (Jennings et al. 2003).

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Greenleaf (1997) did not provide any experimental proof for servant leadership theory (cited in Noland & Richards 2015). Seven practical aspects of servant leadership, which is discussed by Liden and his colleagues (2008) makes the theoretical approach of this paper. Servant leadership has seven main elements: first one refers to emotional support of students and the importance of caring about their comfort; building value for the group and emphasizing on interdependency of the members of the community is the second element; third dimension is to highlight potential and students' individual power for succeed; fourth element is to provide a field for students in which they be engaged in challenges and accordingly gain success; next one addresses the point that servant leader must give priority to serving students' needs and facilitating their success above any other aim; sixth element focuses on teachers' effort in providing a balance between managing the classroom, coaching and designing vision tasks in the process of helping students to succeed and raising their conceptual skills; and finally, the last component is to act ethically and be a role model for students (Liden et al. 2008).

There are few researches related to the practice of servant leadership in educational era (Metzer 2008) while it is necessary to shift from obedience system to community attitude where helping others is highlighted (Herman & Marlowe 2005). It is noticeable that there are considerable numbers of studies about "excellent teaching" (Johnson & Vishwanath 2011, p. 135) which, argue about some of the teachers' quality that are similar to servant leadership practice, like Bain (2004) and Rotenberg (2005) studies. Effective teacher is the one who care about classroom community, supporting students, motivating and engaging them (Roehring et al. 2012).

Previous works on servant leadership in educational field mostly relate this concept to school climate and teachers' job satisfaction. Like Herbst (2003) who worked on implication of servant leadership and its positive correlation with school climate. Another example is Miears's (2004) study, which emphasizes on the strong positive relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction in public schools. Drury (2005) is among the first scholars who studied perception of students about their teachers as servant leaders of their classroom. The focus of this research is on servant leadership as an effective teaching method in college. The finding of this study shows that professors who were chosen as more effective by students use more servant leader

characteristics (cited by Metzer 2008). Metzcar (2008) believes that there is relationship between servant leadership and effective teaching. Lambert (2004) discusses about direct effect of servant leadership on student achievement. The idea of servant leadership is transformable to teacher leadership and is in relation with effective learning and commitment (Noland & Richards 2014).

There is limited literature related to the effect of servant leadership on students' engagement and mostly in these researches, engagement is analyzed as an effective element in measuring students' outcome and learning (e. g. Noland & Richards 2015; Robinson 2009). In such researches, mostly various dimensions and types of learning are considered like affective learning or cognitive learning, motivation and also engagement. In such cases not all aspects of engagement is clearly measured in relation to servant leadership. This research evaluates the engagement factor, which is more affected by servant leadership; behavioral, cognitive, emotional, or agency.

Johnson and Vishwanath (2011) conducted a research about viewpoint of students regarding their learning, course challenges and quality of teaching in their class by using servant leadership theory (Greenleaf 1970). Their findings indicated that however students prefer less challenging classes, they agreed that in more challenging classes, they can be engaged more and consequently learn better. They would like to avoid conflict. The authors believe that application of servant leadership in the classroom can make a challenging and engaging classroom in which conflict is replaced by love and support.

Alhebsi, Pettaway and Waller (2015) discuss that servant teaching used to be practiced by Mutawas in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) who were religious people who used to teach Quran. A study (Pettaway et al. 2015) done in UAE about servant leadership in higher educational organizations suggests leaders to improve their interpersonal skills like raising level of their respects and communication toward followers. There is a gap in literature about practice servant leadership in the UAE classrooms.

Student Engagement

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One of the problems facing by teachers during students' learning process in the classroom is to keep them engaged (Johnson & Vishawanath 2011). Scholars believe that cannot offer one definition of students' engagement only, because this concept can be viewed from different perspectives: cognitive, emotional, social, psychological and behavioral. Some of the features of engaged students is as follow: they focus on their work, obey their class rules, are motivated and participate in course contents inside and outside of the class (Zyngier 2008). Engaged students probably would face challenges better and pay more attention in the class (Klem & Connel 2004).

Engagement in most of researches is describes as multidimensional construct that consists of three types of engagement: in behavioral engagement focus is on students' participation like involvement in academic activities and being present in the class; emotional engagement is about students relationship with their teacher and classmates; cognitive engagement is related to the amount of effort is made by students to master a skill or understand a challenging idea or task like real life application of what they learn in the classroom (Fredricks et al. 2004). Recently, scholars consider agency as a new affective element of engagement. This type of engagement refers to the process in which students intend to identify what and also the situation in which they are learning, for example they may offer a suggestion or ask question during teaching process (Reeve & Tseng 2011).

Most of the researches for understanding students' engagement emphasized on analyzing some quantitative aspects like students' score, their attendance, or their performance in standardized tests but did not consider level of students' enjoyment like their interest or the time they put on learning a task. For example a study conducted among 234 undergraduate students in the UAE indicates that some who were scored higher are the ones who cognitively engage more in the classroom (Albaili 2006). Recently the number of studies that focus on other factors of engagement based on students' and teachers' opinion is increasing (Taylor & Parsons 2011). Clearly, role of teachers in students' engagement is crucial (Taylor & Parsons 2011). Students are more engaged in some classrooms in which teachers care more about students, support them, and make positive emotions toward them (Klem & Connel 2004). Skinner and his colleagues (2008) also argue that the most important responsibility of teachers for engaging students is to support them. Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) discovered that

teachers' leadership impact on students' engagement is as strong as principles' leadership influence.

Results of a research (Kiefer et al. 2015) shows that support of teacher and peer group increase students' classroom engagement in middle school. Hays (2008) believes that teachers can increase class engagement by their performance. According to the fact that focus of teacher's servant leadership practice in the class is on supporting students' well-being, successes and development (Liden et al. 2008; Noland & Richards 2015), it probably affect their engagement. As already has mentioned in the introduction, here, an alternative general hypothesis arose: servant leadership affects middle school students' engagement in social studies classes in Dubai. A research done by Noland and Richards (2014) also proves the mentioned hypothesis. This research did not focus specifically on different dimensions of engagement however. It did not address servant leadership's impact on different types of engagement and just viewed it as a general factor which influence students' outcome. Besides, its questionnaire consists of questions that only address cognitive and behavioral aspects of engagement. In this quantitative study, multiple regression was used to analyze data. Another related study (Pettaway et al. 2015) in the context of the UAE also relied on quantitative method. This research by using questionnaire based on servant leadership model, investigated the relationship between administrates who practice servant leadership and employees. This planned research also due to its purpose, which is about students' perspective regarding servant leadership use quantitative method. Here, effect of servant leadership would be predicted in relation to four different aspects of engagement: emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and agency.

Research Method

Positivism paradigm and objectivist epistemology are used for conducting this research. Positivism approach emphasizes on measuring social and psychological phenomenon with scientific methods (Mackenzie 2011); effect of servant leadership on students' different engagement type in this research. It is believed that reality exists independent from human beings. This approach to research gives a tendency of using statistical methods for analyzing variables (Mackenzie 2011). Quantitative research

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method that is based on gathering numeric data (Gunderson 2002 cited in Muijs 2010) is used for developing this research.

For testing students' engagement, English version of student engagement in school four-dimensional scale questionnaire (SES-4DS). This questionnaire is developed by Veiga (2016). It consists of 20 items and considers all five aspects of engagement: behavioral, cognitive, affective or emotional, and agency. Reviewing literature shows this questionnaire is a valid research instrument (Veiga 2016). It should be mentioned that questionnaire is modified slightly; its scale from six-point Likert scale changed to five-point one with the purpose of avoiding students' confusion and following the same order of another part of the questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire would give a perspective about students' perception regarding servant leadership. Modified version of the seven-factor servant leadership scale (Noland & Richards 2015) by focus on the following factors was used: raising students' conceptual skills, empowering students, helping students' development, giving priority to students, acting ethically, emotional healing and making value for the community. The mentioned questionnaire originally is developed by Liden and his colleagues (2008) and consists of 27 items.

Population of this study is middle school students in Dubai. Totally, 220536 students are studying in 227 public and private schools in Dubai (Knowledge and human development authority 2010/2011). 383 students were calculated to be credible sample size with confidence level of 95% and confidence interval of +/_5. 96 Students were chosen from three first schools and 95 students chosen from the fourth school based on convenience sampling method. Schools also were chosen by the same sampling method. 214 girls and 164 boys in grades seven, eight and nine answered the questionnaires.

Linear Regression was used for predicting the causality between dependent and independent variables and measuring the effect of servant leadership as a holistic phenomenon on students' engagement and its elements. According to Veiga (2016), it is required to recode some of the SES-4DS statements. Therefor, seven statements were recoded. These recoded items are about excluding feeling in classroom, being absent in the class without any acceptable reason, being absent from class when student is in

the school, purposefully disturbing class, not respecting the teacher, feeling lonely in the class, and being unfocused in the class.

Statements related to servant teaching and each components of engagement summed up independently by SPSS and then by linear regression the relationships between different groups of statements was discovered. Ethical issues were considered: permission was obtained from school principles and upon preference of most of them, schools' names are not mentioned in this paper.

Data Analysis

For answering this paper's research questions, analyzed general concept of servant leadership as the independent variable in five independent linear regression tests to measure its impact on engagement as a holistic concept and then on different factors of it separately. A linear regression indicates that servant leadership as a holistic experience could significantly predict students' engagement in general. There is very high statistically significant relationship between servant leadership and engagement. $F_{(1.248)}=82.73$, $p<0.001$. Servant leadership accounted for 24.7% of the clarified variability in student engagement. The regression calculation predicted students' general engagement = 35.936 + .328 x (servant leadership). Based on the result of correlation table in this part, these two variables are positively correlated in a high level. Beta= .500, means that for every standard deviation unit of change in servant leadership, engagement level would raise by .500 of one standard deviation unit. The findings prove this papers' main hypothesis; servant leadership positively impact on students' engagement in social studies classes in Dubai.

Table 1

Coefficients[a]

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.

1	(Constant)	35.936	3.848		9.339	.000
	Servant teaching	.328	.036	.500	9.096	.000

a. Dependent Variable: engagement

Analysis of linear regression predicts causality between servant leadership and cognitive engagement as an element of engagement. These two variables are statistically related. F (1.291)= 115.747, p< .001. Servant leadership style of teachers in the class is 28.2% of variability of students' cognitive engagement. The effect of servant leadership on cognitive engagement is highly significant. Students' cognitive engagement= .337+ .175 x (servant leadership). Amongst different types of engagement tested in this research, servant leadership has the most impact on cognitive engagement, Beta= .533.

Table 2

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	.337	1.736		.194	.846
	Servant teaching	.175	.016	.533	10.759	.000

a. Dependent Variable: cognitive engagement

The third regression analysis states the prediction between servant leadership and behavioral engagement. F (1.271)= 23.406. Statistical relationship between dependent (behavioral engagement) and independent (servant leadership) variables is highly significant, p< .001. Adjusted R square value is .076; servant leadership is accounted as 7.6% of adaptability of behavioral engagement. Students' behavioral engagement value is predicted according to the following formula: behavioral engagement= 24.606 - .093 (servant leadership). Surprisingly, according to negative value of Beta, by raising servant leadership in the social classes, students' behavioral engagement predicted to be decreased, this decline is very slight however.

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Table 3

Coefficients[a]

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1 (Constant)	24.606	2.062		11.931	.000
Servant teaching	-.093	.019	-.282	-4.838	.000

a. Dependent Variable: behavioral engagement

The effect of servant leadership on students' agency engagement is predicted whit linear regression as can be seen in the table 1. F (1.291)= 60.97, p< .05. The statistical relationship between these two variables is significant. Servant leadership accounted for 17% of the explained flexibility in student agency engagement. Agency engagement= 4.08+ .144 (servant leadership). Beta value is .416. Servant leadership, after cognitive engagement, influenced on agency engagement the most, comparing to two other engagement types.

Table 4

Coefficients[a]

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1 (Constant)	4.080	1.967		2.074	.039
Servant teaching	.144	.019	.416	7.809	.000

a. Dependent Variable: agency engagement

Affective (emotional) engagement causality prediction with servant leadership is not significant due to P>.05.

Discussion

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One of the most important concerns of the schools is students' learning and they learn better when they engaged more. It is argued that in memorization process, low level of learning occurs comparing to the time when students are actively involved in the process of learning (Jarvis 1987; Kolb 1984). As is stated by Hattie (2009), some studies are required to focus more on factors of students' engagement as facilitator of their learning. Teachers' performance in classroom can raise students' engagement level (Hays 2008). The main purpose of this research is to determine if servant leadership is an appropriate leadership style to be implemented by teachers in the classroom in order to raise the level of students' engagement. Generally, the findings of this paper indicate that servant leadership impacts on students' engagement in social studies class. Thus, this research agrees with Hays (2008) that implementation of servant leadership in teaching can solve disengagement problem. Students' cognitive and agency engagement is positively affected by practice of servant leadership. Accordingly, it is an appropriate way of keeping students engaged in the classroom.

This paper empirically enriches servant leadership and also engagement literature. Role of teachers and their leadership style in class is related to students' engagement; teachers should create a classroom in which care, support and trust is the base of its relationships (Noddings 2007). Servant leader as a role model should lead toward community engagement, teach conceptual skills to students, and help them to grow. However, in this leadership type, important issue is to serve students and supporting them with their needs even if it is not what they like (Hunter 1998; 2004). Therefore, both weaknesses and strengthens of students should be informed in order to find their growing path. It is noticeable that some students who receive support and positive feedback from their teachers, would be encouraged to engage more (Sun & Chen 2010) and in contrast some students who feel they do not get enough positive feedback from their teacher, would experience lower level of confident and consequently less engagement (Rikards 2009).

Amongst four types of engagement, cognitive gets the most influence from servant leadership. As Piaget (1957) discusses learning does not happen in a passive process, whereas, active engagement and cognitive involvement is an important and critical issue while learning. A research done by Norton (2012) shows positive significant relationship between transformational leadership in the class and students'

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cognitive engagement but there is lack of literature in testing relationship between servant leadership in the class and students' cognitive engagement. Agency engagement also is, significantly, affected by servant leadership in this study. Mearns and his colleagues (2007) argue that students tend to share their opinion more when teacher cares about their needs. Sharing opinion is a part of agency engagement (Reeve & Tseng 2011).

Findings of a research done by Jang, Deci and Reeve (2010) indicated that supporting students' autonomy raises the level of their behavioral engagement. In servant leadership, teachers must coach students and giving them opportunity to have their own learning experience (Metzer 2008) and in another word to have some levels of autonomy. In this research servant leadership and behavioral engagement found to be related but in a negative way, means that servant leadership, somehow, decreases the level of students' behavioral engagement.

Obviously, rather than teachers and their leadership style in the classroom which is discussed in this research, as Estell and Perdue (2013) also mention, multilayer factors influence students' engagement. Even though, there is a rich literature about student engagement (Austin 1984), most of them focused on three factors of engagement only: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. While agency engagement also is as important as other aspects (Reeve & Tseng 2011). The effect of servant leadership on affective engagement was not significant in this research. Not any other study is conducted about servant leadership and its influence on affective engagement to support this result. Whereas, as mentioned earlier, one element of servant leadership is caring for students, trying to build a supporting relationship with them, and avoiding conflict (Drury 2005; Greenleaf 1977; 1998; Hays 2008; Hunter et al. 2013; Liden et al. 2008; Patterson 2003; Stone et al. 2004; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten 2011). A study done in the elementary school, to some extend shows similar results; relationship between students and teachers and having conflict with each other is not related to affective engagement amongst boys, however, this factor is influential for affective engagement level of girls (Archambault et al. 2016). Another study conducted by Estell and Perdue (2013) also indicates similar results; despite the influence of parents and peer support on students' affective engagement, teachers' support is not significantly related to this type of engagement.

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Conclusion

In this quantitative research, the effect of servant leadership as a holistic component on students' engagement is evaluated. In particular, this study analyzed the influence of servant leadership on each elements of engagement independently, which are cognitive, behavioral, affective and agency. Practice of servant leadership positively impacts on engagement in general and specifically increase cognitive, behavioral and agency aspects of engagement in social classes in middle school in Dubai.

The significance of this study is evaluation of all four aspects of engagement in relation to servant leadership as there is a gap in literature in this regard as was discussed earlier. What is more, no research is conducted about teachers' application of servant leadership in Dubai middle school classrooms. This study fills this gap of literature as well. The results of this study can be used by schools and teachers in order to solve disengagement problem; teachers can practice based on the servant leadership for encouraging students to engage more in their classroom.

In quantitative researches cannot touch deeper layers of the reality. Therefore, by viewing this study from qualitative perspective can get deeper knowledge (Sofaer 1999) about the effect of servant leadership on students' engagement. Servant leadership' effect in this investigation is analyzed holistically, while there is a need that future studies consider all factors of it individually in relation to engagement factors. The time for conducting this research was very limited. Word count is another limitation of this paper. Although, 383 students making a credible sample size as already was mentioned in the research method section of this paper, only four schools are chosen out of 227 existing schools in Dubai (KHDA 2010/2011). Accordingly, future researches can conduct the same study by focusing on larger sample of schools to be more representative of the research population. This study can be analyzed in bigger scale as well, like the whole UAE instead of Dubai only. Besides, another limitation of this study is that the effect of gender differences and some other demographic factors are not analyzed.

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