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Liberal Studies and Servant Leadership: Inspiring Ignatian Values at the Margins

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Abstract

This paper aims to unpack how the concept of servant leadership is perceived from Liberal Studies graduates living at the margins of society. Anchoring this research in the work of Jesuit Worldwide Learning (JWL), a faith-based organization providing higher education to displaced and poor communities, this paper seeks to deconstruct the assumption present in the literature of an ‘already-in-power’ servant leader by focusing on servant leaders in vulnerable and marginalized places, where they would be most needed. This article synthesizes the voices of more than 100 graduates from the Diploma in Liberal Studies program and looks at how graduates define servant leadership from the unprivileged perspective and how these graduates could develop and apply this approach in their daily life. Through this analysis, certain values and skills emerge, which permits a contribution to mapping a servant leader’s attributes. This paper concludes on the effect of democratizing the definition of servant leadership with the aims of serving a wider population and having a stronger impact on communities.

Introduction

Servant leadership is often used by scholars working in Jesuit higher education institutions to describe the type of leadership that these institutions want to instill and nurture in their students, as it resonates with the values that these institutions aim at inspiring; it is summarized in the Jesuit motto “men and women for others” coined by Fr Pedro Arrupe S.J. in 1973. This article seeks to unpack how the construct of servant leadership is understood and lived by young people living at the margins who graduated from a Diploma in Liberal Studies, accredited by Regis University and delivered by JWL—Jesuit Worldwide Learning.

Jesuit Worldwide Learning: Higher Education at the Margins (JWL) was originally founded in 2013 in the United States of America and then moved its headquarters to Geneva, Switzerland, in 2016. It provides equitable high-quality tertiary learning to people and communities at the margins of societies—be it through poverty, location, lack of

opportunity, conflict or forced displacement. Its aspiration is that everyone can contribute their knowledge and voice to the global community of learners and together foster hope to create a more peaceful and humane world. JWL is a collaborative global partnership comprised of organizations, institutions, companies and, above all, people, to provide tertiary education to those who would otherwise not have access to higher learning opportunities. It draws on the rich and centuries long Jesuit tradition of higher education and through a blended on-site and online approach, mobilizes the resources of Jesuit and other worldwide networks of educational institutions. The organization is currently active in 14 countries and around 40 local learning centers with 3,335 students in academic and professional programs and Global English Language courses. JWL’s mission is to serve communities and populations affected by the global challenges of our times: refugees, returnees, internally displaced people and poor communities.

The Diploma in Liberal Studies was run from 2010 until 2021. It was the first academic program offered by JWL, and around 600 students have graduated since. At the core of the program is a blended online learning approach, deemed crucial to implement two key components of the Ignatian educational philosophy—companionship and guidance—and to adapt the Ignatian model to students at the margins. Companionship and guidance not only are promoted through community learning centers, where students are accompanied by a local facilitator and work in groups, but are also integrated at a global level, with an international online faculty teaching the courses and facilitating discussion and reflection in the so-called global classroom. This model encourages critical thinking, social awareness and a positive view of self and others.¹ Within Ignatian pedagogy, the process of teaching and learning follows a continuous learning cycle with five distinct stages (Context, Experience, Reflection, Action and Evaluation). These steps are embedded in each unit of the program, with the intent to promote critical thinking and leadership skills and achieve the ultimate goal of Ignatian pedagogy: forming men and women for others. The Diploma in Liberal Studies is composed of fifteen courses, each equivalent to three US credits and delivered in a blended-learning mode for eight weeks where the students work individually using online material and meet weekly for discussions with peers and a learning facilitator in a local Community Learning Centre (CLC). The online content is hosted on the Georgetown University platform and online professors are recruited by JWL to support the students who study in a digital global classroom, giving them feedback on their work and grading their assignments.

Over the years, the Diploma in Liberal Studies has become a very successful program delivered in thirteen learning centers across eight countries: Afghanistan (Bamyan rural center and Herat urban center), Jordan (Amman urban refugee center), Iraq (Domiz Refugee Camp and Khanke Internally Displaced Persons Camp, Erbil urban center), Malawi (Dzaleka Refugee Camp), Sri Lanka (urban centers), Kenya (Kakuma Refugee Camp), Myanmar (urban center) and Zambia (remote rural town).

Literature Review

While the concept of ‘servant’ and ‘leader’ can be considered as oxymora, Greenleaf spent his professional life aiming to reconcile them by developing the concept of ‘servant leadership’. According to him, a servant leader is a:

“servant first. [...] It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. [...] The best test, and difficult to administer is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least not further be harmed?”²

This definition of servant leadership highlights the interconnectedness of its internal and external aspects. Internally, servant leadership allows the servant leader to overcome one’s challenges by becoming at peace with oneself through the process of “accepting [first] our rock and finding happiness by dealing with it.”³ Externally, servant leaders enable others to grow, develop communities and empower its followers.⁴ According to Greenleaf, the job of a leader is to support the “growing [of] people—people who are stronger, healthier, more autonomous, more self-reliant and more competent.”⁵ This focus on growth of the leader permits moving beyond the traditional ‘strong vs weak leader’ dichotomy by placing the importance on the leader’s journey and the drive to serve first. Through this personal journey, the leader has a place to grow while also allowing others to grow as well.

Tumolo’s work on servant leadership develops the idea of growth by integrating the internal and external aspects of servant leadership in a holistic approach that sees the interdependence of the actors and requires viewing servant leadership beyond a leader-only-focus viewpoint.⁶ This means that followers and community become the focus of attention. In fact, Greenleaf articulated servant leadership as intrinsically connected with the healing and wellbeing of individual as whole, communities, and societies.⁷ This integrative

approach of servant leadership, therefore, invites scholars to look as much into the leaders as into its followers while understanding its impact on the community.

This integrated approach to servant leadership is expanded by the work of Song and Ferch which promotes the understanding of servant leadership as means to remove forms of oppression (i.e. patriarchy) and develop gender-integrative leadership approaches.⁸ The use of servant leadership as a means to develop interdependence, harmony and complementing the opposite gender allows projecting leadership studies beyond the powerful/powerless rhetoric of leader/follower. Instead, approaching servant leadership through this harmony-seeking, community-development approach enables placing vulnerability, forgiveness, grace, mercy, restoration and reparation at the heart of the purpose of servant leadership while removing forms of power oppression within the idea of leadership.⁹

Through this emphasis on the process rather than goals, the servant leadership approach is able to look beyond the power hierarchy of leader/followers, as the personal development of followers becomes the priority for leaders. Webb highlights this characteristic of servant leadership as a means to remove inherent and unconscious power dynamics of leaders and followers.¹⁰ Applying servant leadership in this hierarchical context can enable reshuffling of the roles of the traditionally powerful and powerless individuals as its purpose is to empower others. This points to the need to look at servant leadership from the margin. Thus, one of the strengths of servant leadership is that it allows one to overcome power systems while advancing goals of society and empowering others.

The literature spends large amount of efforts aiming to develop Greenleaf's writing, resulting in identifying more than one hundred servant leader characteristics and attributes.¹¹ Among these vast mappings of servant leadership characteristics, Spears's model, which enumerates ten core attributes of servant leaders, is among those most quoted: (1) listening, referring to the importance of the leader to communicate and understand its followers; (2) empathy, the ability to accept others for who they are and understand their positions;

(3) healing, the power of the leader to provide help as whole and hope to its followers; (4) awareness, the conscious analysis of a situation and inner-self; (5) persuasion, the ability of leaders to influence followers based on arguments, not coercion; (6) conceptualisation, the ability to conceive new ideas beyond day-to-day operations to develop a future vision; (7) foresight, planning and forecasting potential outcomes in the situation to develop solutions; (8) stewardship, the capacity of holding something in trust for another entity and the commitment to serve others; (9) commitment to the growth of the people, the capacity of servant leaders to develop the personal, professional and spiritual growth of followers; (10) building community, the purpose and individual needs to develop local communities.¹² These ten characteristics are providing a grounding on which to analyze further servant leaders. While the servant leadership literature does not always include the ideas of vulnerability and mercy as core characteristics, it often shares Buck's values of growing communities and developing harmonious relationships between leader and followers.¹³

The definition of servant leadership is further elaborated by comparing and contrasting it to other models of value-based leadership, such as transformation, ethical and authentic leadership.¹⁴ The main distinctive trait that makes servant leadership stand out is its genuine interest in the development and wellbeing of followers.¹⁵ Servant leaders give priority to serving others, placing importance on the growth of their followers as the steering wheel of their leadership approach. This permits observing the wellbeing of their followers as a continuous journey, enabling the empowerment of both the followers and the leaders.

This specificity of servant leadership as seeking to accompany the follower on a personal journey to empowerment, and to become the best version of one's self, strongly resonates with the Ignatian philosophy of leadership. This is nicely evidenced by the dialogue between Kelly and Breen, which identifies this style of leadership as one of the main contemporary leadership theories that aligns with Ignatian leadership.¹⁶ Ignatian leadership and servant leadership share many traits; they are both counter-cultural as they do not follow

individualistic, competitive and consumeristic philosophies and several features of an Ignatian leader, such as self-awareness, cultural awareness and humility, are discussed in the literature informing the servant leader approach.¹⁷ The strong connection between Ignatian Spirituality and servant leadership is also demonstrated by the variety of literature written on the latter by former scholars from Jesuit higher education institutions, namely in this outlet and in the *Journal of Servant Leadership* edited by Gonzaga University.

Despite the growing importance on servant leadership, the study presented in this article addresses several gaps in the current literature. Firstly, there is a methodological gap, as only a small number of studies so far have been qualitative in nature; secondly, a geographical scope gap exists, as most of the published literature on servant leadership focuses on America and China, with only 12 studies presenting a comparative and cross-national component.¹⁸ Furthermore, this research study does not focus on people in prominent leadership positions (yet) nor on exemplary leaders like most literature in the field.¹⁹ Conversely, it traces the journey towards servant leadership by young graduates that transform their workplaces, their families and their communities as they become well-rounded leaders, seeking the *magis*, linking the study back to Ignatian philosophy and leadership. This research reports, through the accounts of young graduates living at the margins, how servant leadership can transform not only professional environments, but more holistically, individuals' lives and their communities.

Methodology

This research uses a participatory and qualitative approach with the explicit aim of nurturing transformation.²⁰ The focus of this article on servant leadership is part of a larger research effort to map the impact that the Diploma in Liberal Studies had on the lives of its graduates.²¹ As the first step of this impact study, the research team held a participatory workshop with different stakeholders within JWL—students, graduates, onsite and online facilitators, center and country coordinators and headquarters staff; the workshop aimed at collaboratively reflecting on defining

impact in terms of personal transformation (self-perception and behavior) and communal change. The identified dimensions were subsequently ranked by the thirty participants; six of them were selected as the most important: critical thinking, leadership, empowerment, self-confidence, sense of community and intercultural and interreligious sensitivity. This collaborative work formed the basis to elaborate the semi-structured interview protocol that had a section specifically devoted to unpacking the representation of servant leadership and its lived experience for the graduates.

In line with JWL's transformational approach to research, this project was an opportunity to work on the capacity building of JWL graduates; therefore, we selected research assistants in Dzaleka Refugee Camp (Malawi), Kakuma Refugee Camp (Kenya), Amman (Jordan) and Afghanistan to conduct interviews with their fellow graduates. The research assistants attended a one-day online training session on data collection and research ethics and the international research team met once a week to report progress and challenges, as well as to create a peer-learning environment, leading to the creation of a community of practice over the two months of data collection (September and October 2020). The interview protocol was piloted in Iraq in August 2020 and then refined by the research assistants, who interviewed one another to become familiar with the interview process.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data and the thematic coding process was conducted with the help of the software, Dedoose.²² After each interview had been transcribed by the global research team, the data was uploaded to Dedoose to be coded and further analyzed. The codes were developed based on a thematic approach, using a top-down/bottom-up cyclical process. For the first few interviews, main themes were noted on paper in order to isolate the main categories of codes. After listening to a few interviews, the coding structure was created in Dedoose until all identified themes were fully represented. Additional themes were identified over the course of the analyses and were later included, whenever a new salient dimension emerged.

Country	JWL site	# interviews
Afghanistan	Bamyan	19
	Herat	11
Iraq	Duhok	1
	Erbil	5
Jordan	Amman	8
Kenya	Kakuma	53
Malawi	Dzaleka	39
Total		136

Table 1: Interviews by location

Country	Male	Female
Afghanistan	12	18
Iraq	1	5
Jordan	5	3
Kenya	43	10
Malawi	32	7
Total	93	43

Table 2: Participants' gender by country

Two main limitations to the research design can be identified. First, given that interviews were conducted by JWL staff (the Global Research Team), participants may have felt unable to fully express themselves and to report possible negative impacts of the Diploma in their lives. Additionally, another potential bias may have emerged from the presence of different interviewers. Although all the interviewers had the same training, certain interviewers had a different approach to some questions, which resulted in emphasizing some aspects more than others.

Finally, a total of 136 graduates in 5 countries took part into this research and were interviewed by the research team; table 1 shows their distribution by location.

Among the 136 interviews conducted, 93 interviewees were males (68%) and 43 were females (32%). While males were more represented overall, there were more female participants than males in Afghanistan and Iraq. This trend is in line with the gender distribution of the overall population of graduates.

Most participants (69%) were refugees or former refugees now resettled. Again, this is in line with the overall Diploma graduate's population, with the two largest and oldest centers offering the Diploma being in Kakuma and Dzaleka refugee camps.

Findings

Analysis of the interviews aimed at understanding the lived experience of servant leadership by young people living at the margins and formed within the framework of Ignatian education. The contribution to the literature is twofold: firstly, this study adds a perspective from the margins to the existing scholarly production, showing how leaders, who perceive themselves as servants, can contribute to the transformation of their local societies and communities towards the scaffolding of a more peaceful world. Secondly, it adds a holistic reflection encompassing both the effects of this value-based style of leadership on the leaders and their respective communities.

Defining servant leadership from the margins

Through the various testimonies collected, graduates aim to provide a definition of leadership from a perspective of the margins. By following a value-based approach toward servant leadership, graduates often perceive leadership from an evaluative standpoint, allowing them to identify the defining factors of good leadership from bad leadership.²³ To do this, they often start by defining what good leadership is not. For example, a graduate in Kenya expresses that those leaders who have “no sense on how to bring people together” and deal with hatred and discrimination should change their style of leadership to avoid such inequality in the communities.²⁴ This recognizes that having strong leadership is not dependent on titles or positions, but instead on the way the community is cared for, which opens new dimensions of understanding of what a makes good leader.

Servant leadership has a two-fold characteristic of both an outward and inward direction.²⁵ Graduates identify the need for servant leaders to be a leader first of oneself in order to be a leader of others. Perceived as an innate tool that one has to hold onto and develop throughout life,

leadership is a reflexive competence that allows one to guide one's future. This graduate in Malawi exemplifies this double-edged characteristic:

“Before you start leading somebody, you have to start from somewhere. That somewhere must be from you first of all, then the next door, then the entire community within. So, leadership helped me to release keys to others.”²⁶

While a strong sense of self-awareness becomes an essential element of servant leadership, graduates are conscious that this self-leadership has an outer purpose, which is to “create dangerously,” going above and beyond for the benefit of the community served.²⁷ Graduates' narratives mostly refer to leadership being deployed to serve others, fulfilling a vision and purpose. This participant in Afghanistan speaks about leadership as being applicable to different contexts: “I am a leader of myself, I am the leader of my family and I am the leader of my friends,”²⁸ stressing the encompassing and overarching function of servant leadership beyond the organization's walls.²⁹

Whether in the alumni's respective communities, their family or professional lives, graduates demonstrated that leadership can be practiced in many spheres of daily life. At the community level, this graduate in Kenya reveals the effect of the Diploma on leadership skills.³⁰ She articulates this impact in terms of growth of agency in her community:

“Before I was enrolled to the Diploma, I thought that everything was impossible. [...] I couldn't even take any initiative to play in a role in the community. But [in] the Diploma, I also learned the course called leadership, I became aware of what is of me, what I should do at least to bring change in the community and that's how I accepted the role of being a leader in the community.”³¹

This reflection highlights the transition from being unconscious of her leadership potential to mindfully becoming a leader among her community through the support of the Diploma. Thus, after realizing the commitment and

motivation within themselves with the help of the Diploma, graduates describe leadership as a tool oriented to serving others.

Furthering the findings of the literature, graduates' perspectives develop an idea of leadership that encompasses the notion and objective of serving others.³² In the words of this graduate living in Jordan, "leadership is not about you! It is about you and others!"³³ This graduate in Malawi provides an example of how this principle is applied in daily life:

"A man who died recently [...], who was living with stroke since 2012, he died in 2018 because he was not able to control himself. It's why since 2012 I have helped him. I washed him three times a week during six years, 3 times a week is the sense of having humanness to understand the community and to do something. Especially when you see someone is abandoned, you can approach him in order to tell him to have courage, to have patience, and to continue to live even though the life is very difficult."³⁴

This graduate embodies the principle that as a leader, one should be willing to take on true commitment to help others and support them in solving their issues or, in the words of Armstrong and Spears, applying the "ethics of accompaniment."³⁵ This concept is understood as a means to build reciprocal relationships between servant leaders and followers which "facilitate healing for those with hopelessness in the face of suffering and foster the space for those yearning to be listened to and to tell one's story."³⁶ While this notion can be helpful to emphasizing the importance of the relationship between leaders and followers, Armstrong and Spears assume a power hierarchy that places leaders as untouchables and constantly in positions of power and strength.³⁷ However, the example demonstrated by this graduate in Malawi shows that servant leaders can emerge from a place of marginalization. In this context, role models become essential to sparking this servant leadership approach.

Intertwined with the idea of responsibility towards others, being a role model is perceived as an

essential attribute to be a good leader. This graduate highlights this perspective as he defines that "a good leader must be a good example in the society, so I always try [...] to be a good example, a role model."³⁸ As leading by example becomes the norm for these graduates, this alumna in Malawi gives an example in which she acted as a role model by inspiring other women in her community to pursue their educational goals:

"I got some leadership skills in the sense that in my society, I'm considered as a leader and [...] most of people [...] they do discourage their daughters to go to school or to go further with education, believing that after education they won't be employed. They will just remain at home and get married and start taking care of children. But me, I'm a good example of leadership in the sense that I go in the camp and then, try to sensitize the community concerning women or girls' education, giving them my example [that if] [...] I didn't reach diploma, I wouldn't be able to get this job that I'm doing here. And as a female, due to my studies, [...] I'm able to even support my family financially due to education, so women can also be leaders."³⁹

These examples challenge the narrative that the servant leader already comes from a place of power and privilege. Instead, these graduates show that anyone can be a servant leader by setting the standards of servant leadership through daily examples, no matter the socioeconomic status of the leader. This contribution enables moving beyond the assumption of an 'already-powerful servant leader' and democratizes the definition of servant leadership. As vulnerability can be one of the sparks to becoming a servant leader, these graduates show that through their resilience and constant focus on serving others, servant leadership can also help to heal and bring hope to the margins from the margins.⁴⁰

Learning about leadership to become servant leaders

During the interviews, graduates shared how gaining knowledge and skills particularly helped them to develop their leadership competence.

While alumni pinpoint two main ways to learn about and build leadership, there is a clear consciousness that “knowledge equals power,”⁴¹ and developing leadership through knowledge can lead therefore to developing one’s self-confidence and potentially becoming empowered.⁴² For example, this graduate shared how,

“[the Diploma] has empowered [me]. It has helped me in terms of leadership. Because [...] this is the truth from my heart. It was my first time to discover what leadership is.”⁴³

This self-transformation through knowledge highlights the value of the Diploma, teaching how to shape a basic understanding of leadership and how to develop one’s own competencies in that area. While this knowledge can come from the content of the courses, it is also explored through peer learning. This graduate in Malawi demonstrates the efficacy of learning from one another to develop leadership:

“The first thing I learnt from JWJL is every time to believe that we learn from one another, when you believe that life is for learning from one another, this is whereby you start realizing the power of leadership.”⁴⁴

Thus, graduates could develop their leadership through both the content explored by the Diploma in Liberal Studies and through the learning environment, as well as modelling and peer support available to them both onsite and through the global virtual classroom.

Characteristics of servant leadership: value and skills

Among the many traits identified by the literature, graduates complement the mapping of servant leadership characteristics with the following seven values and four skills.⁴⁵

Values

Graduates identify the following seven values attached to servant leaders: courage, humility, honesty, empathy, integrity and equality and responsibility toward the community.

Courage

In line with the literature, participants identify courage as one of the important values of a leader.⁴⁶ According to interviews, leaders may face difficult challenges, often associated with important risks that will require them to demonstrate their courage. For example, this graduate from Afghanistan sees her courage as leadership through her potentially dangerous work commute:

“One of the risks that I have taken is traveling to Kabul. Because you know the situation in Afghanistan is not good, especially traveling from Bamiyan to Kabul. It is a big risk that I’m taking every time.”⁴⁷

As this alumna defines courage through her ability to take the risk of experiencing a difficult situation, she reminisces that through her studies at the Diploma, courage was one of the key characteristics of being a leader. In addition to overcoming fear, courage requires resilience. This same Afghan participant shares her professional progression was only possible because of her determination to succeed:

“We have to never give up and we have to take risks and we have to start from the less and we have to be satisfied with even in small things you do so [...] So first I was a student, by hard and hard-working [...], I could be the leader and I’m leading [...] centers now.”⁴⁸

Humility

Humility is understood as a core value of servant leadership.⁴⁹ Participants expressed this link between leadership and humility as this graduate in Kenya is conscious that “[...] even with your achievement, you should be humble, down to earth [...] Wherever I go, let me not be defined by my position but my action” and concludes by highlighting the interconnection between servant leadership and humility: “One thing this programme instilled in me is humility. Serving people with humility. I am grateful for the effort of JWJL.”⁵⁰

This intertwining of humility and servant leadership translates through the willingness of the participants to evaluate their leadership from the perspective of the people they are serving. A graduate in Malawi exemplified this point as he shared that it is not up to him to tell whether he is a good leader but rather up to the person that he is serving to decide on his leadership competence.⁵¹ This importance given to humility allows servant leaders to acknowledge their weakness while boosting their willingness to serve.⁵² Therefore, through this self-reflection process, the more a servant leader becomes humble, the more “servant” the leadership style becomes.⁵³

Honesty

Closely related to humility is the value of honesty, which is also crucial for a servant leader.⁵⁴ For this graduate in Afghanistan, honesty is identified as the first step to becoming a good leader. She recalls her learning experience in the Diploma: “I know that a leader should first be honest in her/his community”.⁵⁵ This crucial importance given to honesty is furthered by the willingness to be transparent with one’s community. A participant specifies the need to solve issues peacefully and in a transparent manner:

“If there’s something you want to change, do it pacifically. Just sit with them and show them [...]. They will understand, instead of going there and decide on your own and you come to impose: ‘this is supposed to be like this, and this is supposed to be this’. They will strike, and you will not be [in] good times.”⁵⁶

Empathy

Another significant element toward servant leadership is empathy.⁵⁷ The aforementioned graduate already hints at this need to develop mutual understanding between the leader and the community through transparent communication.⁵⁸ This presence of an empathetic and respectful relationship can lead to trust and reconciliation between the actors involved. For graduates, this empathy can be demonstrated in a shift in perspective toward others. For example, this

graduate in Kenya employed his leadership by seeking to apologize to his Muslim peers:

“One day, I called my Muslim [friend], pray to apologize for all whatever I have said about his religion and his culture. [...] The Diploma helped me to understand culture and religion to the fullest.”⁵⁹

This capacity to understand the other’s perspective relates to the idea of tolerance. This Afghan alumnus illustrates the role of tolerance and empathy when speaking about religion with such a perspective of empathy and mutual respect:

“I will say that you know if someone is praying a stone, he likes to pray that: if someone is praying God, so he likes to pray God. So that’s their belief and we should be open and accepting this religion. [...] most of the time I think, if I was born in United States of America, I will be Christian. [...] And if I was born in China, maybe I follow Buddhism.”⁶⁰

Self-reflection on one’s cultural and religious identity and approach to diversity allows graduates to develop values of empathy, respect and equality, which are crucial to developing servant leadership practices.

Integrity and equality

One focus of servant leadership is to uphold the value of personal integrity, which requires applying the principle of equality at all times.⁶¹ In the words of a graduate in Kenya, a leader must:

“[...] be a person with Integrity, a person must be exemplary to the people because as a leader, you must ensure that you love everyone. A leader must be fair to everyone. A leader must not discriminate. A leader must not be greedy, and must not be corrupted. [...] a leader must be transparent, especially dealing with the issues to do with money.”⁶²

This enumeration of a servant leader’s qualities is centered on the values of impartiality and fairness. Applied in situations of conflict, these two

characteristics enable maintaining servant leadership when it can be placed at risk. This graduate in Kenya depicted the role of impartiality by accentuating facilitation as a technique to achieve high standards of morale in practice:

“[...] my work is to moderate, to ensure they come to conclusions, we will not enforce anything. As a leader, you are not supposed to take sides, because when you take sides, you are going to make things worse, you are going to make them escalate and it will get out of hand so that’s what my [understanding of] leadership is.”⁶³

Therefore, graduates’ identification of these values as intrinsic to leadership allows forming a servant leadership approach deployed from the margins of society for the marginalized.

Responsibility toward the community

The notion of responsibility toward the community is central to a servant leadership approach, as “creating value for the community appears” the most crucial dimension for servant leadership, both from the perspective of the leaders and the followers.⁶⁴ This graduate in Afghanistan enunciates this principle clearly:

“It is our responsibility and it is our community that we have [...] to take that bottle and put that [...] in a wastebasket and through that, I can make him understand that we should be having [...] a feeling to concern about our community.”⁶⁵

This responsibility toward the community is a demonstration of the agape love, which relies on the following three components: effective listening, valuing people and equality.⁶⁶ It has been demonstrated that love toward followers and its effects can be empowering, healing and strong when it is used within a servant leadership approach. The idea of love, being passionate and dedicated to the work, is demonstrated as helping to overcome shadows of the world.⁶⁷ In the context of the marginalized community that JWL and our graduates serve, the issues are not only based on materialistic problems but also on social

and legal ones. In spite of the complexity of the elements forming these “shadows,” graduates, through their deep care, responsibility and sense of community, are able to attenuate some of these shadows by applying a servant leadership approach.

Skills

In addition to having specific sets of values, graduates identify a set of skills that are essential to practicing good leadership. Supported by the research findings of Riggio and Tan, graduates identify the four following soft skills as major components of their leadership competence: collective work, problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication skills.⁶⁸

Collective work

First, collective work management is identified as a key element of developing servant leadership skills. Highlighting the quality to “have that spirit of calling each and every one [and] working as a team,”⁶⁹ graduates understand that good leaders “seek advice from the rest of the people.”⁷⁰ This teamwork approach relies on the value of equality among team members. This alumnus states that in order to develop strong teamwork, equality should be set as a basic standard:

“We all feel equal, and we’re equally empowered in sharing our ideas even communicating and that’s really helpful for me as a leader having good connection and good interaction [...] with all the people I’m working with and with all the people I’m living within the community.”⁷¹

This collective approach can even alleviate some of the burdens that leadership brings. For example, this graduate explains that before the Diploma:

“[I] was doing everything alone but [...] after getting knowledge from the Diploma, [I have] now delegated some responsibility to other people and all work went well and also [I] was set free.”⁷²

Problem-solving

Additionally, graduates pinpoint problem-solving as one of the skills that a servant leader should have. For this graduate, evaluating one's leadership should be solely based on one's ability to resolve conflict:

"The way that I can explain to someone how I am a good leader is the way I resolve conflict. Then you can describe that someone is a good leader."⁷³

This graduate in Kenya emphasizes this skill by elaborating on the approach one should take when solving problems:

"When solving problems as a leader, [...] first of all you have to avoid discriminating people. You have to be humble when solving problems. You don't have to be rude in what you are doing. So that people will feel at least at home when you are solving problems [...]. You have to solve problems equally without favoring others as the leader."⁷⁴

Encompassing values of equality, humility, respect and problem-solving thus emerges as a key feature of graduates' approach to leadership.

Critical thinking

Intertwined with the idea of problem-solving, critical thinking is seen as a key characteristic of a servant leader. As the mindset to solve conflict, critical thinking is the tool that enacts servant leadership. From the perspective of this participant in Malawi, critical thinking can be defined based on leadership. He states that "critical thinking is a fact that you understand something and you guide or lead [...] in a good manner".⁷⁵ This motivation to lead in a 'positive' way through critical thinking relates to the willingness to contribute to the betterment of the community, as this graduate explains:

"The critical thinking is all about coming up with the possible solution, how to solve conflict among people in the camp, so the Diploma [...] has really empowered me on critical thinking, especially in the

community. People do call me Peacemaker and, previously, no one was calling me a peacemaker."⁷⁶

Therefore, from this viewpoint, critical thinking appears to be a mindset that permits leadership development for the wellbeing of the community.

Communication and public speaking skills

Lastly, along with the literature, interviewees assert that communication skills seem to be one of the most important skills a leader should have.⁷⁷ Elaborating on the notion of receptive communication, this characteristic suggests holistic forms of communication, suggesting that action can be transformed into the future based on an empathetic awareness.⁷⁸ This graduate, who held a chair position in the Human Rights Council in a refugee camp in Malawi and leads a social and economic movement in his home country, unveils the relevance of this encompassing style of communication within leadership:

"Communication is one of the keys [to avoid conflict]. The heads should communicate with their toes. Yeah, the chair should communicate with the cleaner. Yes, the director of the company should have very good communication with [his] workers. Or any leader must have like effective communication with the followers. That's the most important thing because, from communication, you will be able to discover the deficit [...] that you have, like the challenges which people have."⁷⁹

While communication can be understood as a crucial tool to develop servant leadership for the community, it can also be for the benefit of one's life. Particularly, public speaking seems to be influential for some graduates in terms of building their self-confidence and developing leadership skills.⁸⁰ For example, graduates have shared that before the Diploma, they were shy and afraid of public speaking.⁸¹ However, after the Diploma, they were able to express themselves even in front of a large audience:

"Now, even if I speak among thousands and millions of people, I do not feel such

kind of way. I'm very brave, I'm strong and I can believe in myself and I can do whatever I want."⁸²

This liberation of the voice of graduates reveals the influential role of the Diploma on their leadership and self-confidence. Hence, graduates recognize the importance of strong communication skills to building strong leadership.

Empowerment of servant leaders and their communities

Graduates have demonstrated that their understanding of what leadership means is following a servant leadership approach that is set at the margin of society for the most marginalized. Through the mapping of skills and values pertaining to servant leaders, graduates identify the impact of servant leadership. While the literature identifies community empowerment as a key consequence of developing servant leadership, graduates enrich these findings by adding the role of this leadership approach on personal empowerment and transformation of the leaders.⁸³ This graduate in Afghanistan illustrates this interior self-actualization in the following words:

"Now, I am having the light [...] when I am going to the dark way and just holding the light, so this light is leadership and the darkness is the problem, so I am going and it shows me you can just pass where you want to go."⁸⁴

Finding one's voice can often result in carrying and amplifying the voice of the voiceless and supporting this double empowerment of the self and the community. This refugee in Jordan expresses:

"Many communities have been affected with war in their country and they don't have a chance to show their voice to the world. I see that from the readings from the paper I do, interacting with them and within that it gives me the courage that to be in their voice."⁸⁵

His readiness to take on the responsibility to amplify community voices reveals the courage of

the graduate to address social issues in this context. This form of empowerment through leadership can be translated in terms of self-confidence. Whether it is through voicing a concern or standing in front of a public delivering a speech, self-confidence emerges as a considerable effect of performing a leadership role. For example, this block leader shares that before she joined the Diploma, she was always afraid to face other block leaders, always putting her head down when addressing them.⁸⁶ After she joined the Diploma, she became more confident, "very strong" and "happy again." She adds that this inspired her "to stand for the voiceless," as she became a community caseworker, particularly fighting against gender-based violence. She illustrates this transformation through the following example:

"Here in block 11, people like drinking, and fighting for no reason and men are beating their wives, girls are being raped and [there is] theft. I remember I put down and talk to them. I asked myself what made me this way, I remembered oh, it was the community advocacy in the Diploma, it has really impacted me."⁸⁷

She concludes by highlighting that overcoming challenges made her feel more important, confident and a better leader than when she first joined the Diploma:

"Many have been asking me who brings you up to this level? I tell them it's JWL. They asked me is JWL a person? We want to talk to JWL. We were two Uganda graduated from JWL and our achievements became a story of the day. I was breastfeeding by then. The example they would give was 'look at her she is a mother of three and she has done a lot no man in this community tried. What about you? You have opportunity here in the camp.' I became [...] [a] reference and consultant. I feel big."⁸⁸

This example highlights the impact of the Diploma in shaping this personal growth through developing the intrinsic skills of leadership and confidence simultaneously. Thus, through many examples of community-serving leadership,


graduates articulate their willingness to amplify not only their own voices but also those of the communities and marginalized people. This personal growth and increase in self-confidence enable turning their servant leadership skills gained through the Diploma into personal and community empowerment.

Conclusions

This article contributes to fill a gap in the literature on servant leadership by exploring this approach to leadership from the perspective of the margins: young people who live as refugees in camps (Malawi and Kenya), in urban settings (Amman), as part of minority communities (Iraq Kurdistan), or in rural communities (Afghanistan). The piece offered an articulation of the concept of servant leadership from their perspectives, springing from their lived experience. It discusses the values attached to servant leaders, according to their perspective of growing leaders: courage, humility, honesty, empathy, integrity, equality and responsibility toward the community. This is in addition to the skills they acquire studying in the Diploma of Liberal Studies offered by Regis University and JWL that shaped their leadership competence: collective work, problem-solving, critical thinking and communication skills.

Most importantly, this article demonstrates that servant leadership does not have to start in positions of power but, instead, can emerge from the place where it is most needed. These

testimonies of servant leadership from the margins of society have demonstrated that servant leaders can emerge anywhere, from small daily situations, such as behaving as a servant leader toward one's own neighbor, to larger settings in the community, such as becoming community leaders and representatives. This democratization of servant leadership does not minimize its effects; on the contrary, this bottom-up servant dynamic enables not only the emancipation of the leader but also of their communities.

In order to delve further into this perspective of servant leadership from the margins, especially taking into consideration JWL and its work, we see three possible paths for future research: (1) to unpack how these emerging young leaders, who graduated from the Diploma in Liberal Studies in the aforementioned settings, are perceived by their followers, and by their community, in order to understand whether and how this particular approach to leadership is understood and felt by the people that encounter the Diploma graduates; (2) to understand how different higher education programs contribute to the development of this existential competence, according to the framework based on knowledge and skills, existential competences and self- and community empowerment drawn from the larger study this article is part of; and (3) to investigate how servant leadership is nurtured by the different elements of the blended learning model developed by JWL and rooted in Ignatian pedagogy.⁸⁹ 

Notes

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