

# **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AMONG TEACHERS IN X HIGHER VOCATIONAL COLLEGES IN HENAN PROVINCE, CHINA**

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to examine the relationship between perceived servant leadership and teacher professional development among teachers in X higher vocational colleges in Henan Province, China. A quantitative method was applied using validated scales for servant leadership and professional development. A total of 242 questionnaires were distributed, and 240 valid responses were collected. Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, independent sample t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson correlation analysis. The results indicated that both perceived servant leadership and professional development were at a moderate level. Significant differences were found in servant leadership perception based on gender and professional title, while age, education level, and teaching experience showed no significant differences. For teacher professional development, significant differences were identified across education levels and professional titles, but not across gender, age, or teaching experience. Moreover, a significant positive correlation existed between perceived servant leadership and teacher professional development. Based on the findings, this study recommended continuous leadership training for teachers, improvement of the professional development system, and the creation of a supportive teaching environment to promote synergy between leadership and professional growth.

**Keywords:** Teachers in Higher Vocational Colleges, Servant Leadership, Professional Development

## **Introduction**

In recent years, China's vocational education system has undergone a significant transformation in response to the demands of digital innovation, economic restructuring, and industrial upgrading. Higher vocational institutions, which serve as key platforms for cultivating technically skilled professionals, are increasingly tasked with not only meeting industry needs but also aligning their

teaching and administrative strategies with modern educational values (Lan, 2025). As a result, enhancing teacher capacity has become a central concern. Among the various factors that influence teacher growth, leadership style has emerged as a pivotal element in shaping faculty engagement, motivation, and long-term professional development (Peng, Liu, & Zhang, 2022).

Servant leadership has attracted growing attention in educational research as an alternative to traditional top-down leadership models. Initially proposed by Greenleaf (1977), servant leadership is rooted in the principle of “serving first and leading second.” It focuses on empowering others, promoting collaboration, and building a culture of mutual trust and support. In the educational context, servant leadership has been linked to positive outcomes such as increased teacher autonomy, professional commitment, and improved school climate (Black, 2010; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Studies have also shown that servant leadership contributes to stronger organizational citizenship behaviors and team resilience, particularly in settings where innovation and adaptability are essential (Ahmad et al., 2025; Spears, 2024).

In the case of China, the Ministry of Education’s policy on vocational teacher development has explicitly emphasized the construction of a “dual-qualified” teacher workforce, combining strong academic backgrounds with rich industry experience. However, many higher vocational colleges still operate under bureaucratic or hierarchical administrative structures that limit teacher agency, restrict participation in decision-making, and overlook the emotional and developmental needs of teaching staff (Gong, 2023). This mismatch between institutional governance and the evolving demands of teacher development calls for a re-examination of leadership practices.

Henan Province, as a major industrial and population center in China, hosts over 100 higher vocational colleges. Despite the province’s expansive educational network, challenges such as imbalanced faculty composition, a shortage of practical teaching experience, and insufficient professional growth opportunities remain prominent. Teachers often report limited participation in strategic planning, over-reliance on theoretical training, and a lack of personalized or industry-integrated development pathways (Zhang, 2025). Moreover, digital transformation has further increased the demand for interdisciplinary teaching competence and emotional resilience among faculty members (Lan, 2025).

Teacher professional development encompasses the enhancement of professional knowledge, pedagogical skills, and educational ethics through continuous learning, practice, and reflection (Day & Sachs, 2020). It is considered a long-term, dynamic process that requires institutional support, leadership engagement, and access to meaningful learning opportunities. However, the link between perceived leadership style and teacher development in China’s vocational institutions remains under-researched. While international literature suggests a strong correlation between servant leadership and teacher growth (Eva et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2020), empirical evidence from the Chinese higher vocational context is scarce.

This study focused on exploring the relationship between perceived servant leadership and teacher professional development in higher vocational institutions in Henan Province, China. By analyzing how teachers perceive servant leadership practices—such as empathy, empowerment, humility, vision-building, and trust—this research aimed to determine their impact on various dimensions of professional development. The findings were intended to provide practical insights for educational administrators seeking to improve institutional leadership strategies and establish sustainable, teacher-centered development systems within vocational education.

### **Research Objectives**

- (1) To understand the current status of teachers perceived servant leadership.
- (2) To understand the current status of teachers' professional development.
- (3) To analyze the differences in teachers perceived servant leadership under different demographic variables.
- (4) To analyze the differences in teachers' professional development under different demographic variables.
- (5) To determine the correlation between teachers perceived servant leadership and their professional development.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Theoretical Framework***

Servant leadership theory was first introduced by Greenleaf (1970), who emphasized that leaders should prioritize service over authority. Studies confirmed that servant leadership could improve job satisfaction, innovation, and organizational commitment (Ehrhart, 2004; Van Dierendonck, 2011). In China, researchers also noted its relevance in education reform and team cohesion (Zhang, 2024).

Teacher professional development theory evolved from skill-based models to holistic models. A sustainable development model emphasized knowledge renewal, identity, and emotional labor (Day & Sachs, 2020). In the Chinese context, a “practice-reflection-community” model promoted contextual and collaborative teacher learning (Wang, 2021).

#### ***Research on Servant Leadership***

Servant leadership included dimensions such as empathy, empowerment, vision, humility, and trust (Liden et al., 2008; Russell & Stone, 2002). Empirical studies confirmed its positive influence on project success, team resilience, and employee satisfaction (Ahmad et al., 2025; Spears, 2024). In educational settings, it enhanced teacher motivation and school climate (Black, 2010; Mahadih et al., 2024).

Measurement tools varied. For example, a multidimensional scale was validated by Khawaja and Frederic (2019), and a six-factor model was developed for coaching by Takamatsu (2022). In China,

adapted scales were used in medical and educational settings with good reliability (Zhou et al., 2023).

### ***Research on Teacher Professional Development***

Teacher professional development referred to the continuous improvement of knowledge, skills, and values through learning and reflection (Lieberman & Mace, 2008). It was influenced by personal motivation, organizational context, and leadership (Evans, 2014; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) theory emphasized the integration of subject knowledge and pedagogy (Shulman, 1987).

Dimensions included professional knowledge, skills, and ethics. Tools such as TPACK and CLASS were widely applied to assess development (Schmidt et al., 2009; Pianta et al., 2008). In China, research focused on dual-qualification models and career stage theories (Wen, 2024; Wang, 2024).

### ***Research on the Relationship Between Servant Leadership and Teacher Professional Development***

Servant leadership supported teacher development by promoting autonomy, psychological safety, and well-being (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016; Eva et al., 2019). In China, caring leadership behaviors had a stronger impact on professional engagement than institutional incentives (Wu et al., 2020).

The cultural context also played a role. Shared vision and moral modeling enhanced teacher collaboration (Gong, 2023). Middle-level leadership and systemic support further strengthened collective learning (Li, 2023; He, 2024).

### ***Overview of Teachers in Higher Vocational Colleges in Henan Province***

The selected college had multiple campuses and focused on industry-oriented education. It promoted teacher empowerment through training, dual-qualification programs, and curriculum development participation.

### ***Summary of Related Literature***

Servant leadership had a positive impact on teacher motivation, collaboration, and professional identity. However, limited empirical evidence existed for vocational education in China. This study aimed to fill that gap by analyzing the relationship between perceived servant leadership and teacher professional development.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

This study adopted a quantitative research design, primarily using a questionnaire survey to explore the relationship between perceived servant leadership and professional development among teachers in higher vocational colleges. Based on a review of relevant literature, mature scales were selected as measurement tools, and data were collected through structured questionnaires. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS 26.0 to test the hypotheses.

### ***Participants***

The participants of this study were full-time teachers from higher vocational colleges in Henan Province. A total of 210 questionnaires were distributed, and 197 valid responses were collected, resulting in a valid response rate of 93.8%. The sample covered teachers from different departments, ages, and professional backgrounds, which ensured the diversity and representativeness of the data.

### ***Instrument***

The questionnaire consisted of three parts.

The first part collected demographic information, including gender, age, years of teaching, and professional title.

The second part measured teachers' perceived servant leadership using the scale developed by Liden et al. (2008), which includes five dimensions: empowerment, humility, standing back, accountability, and courage.

The third part measured teachers' professional development, drawing on the dimensions of professional knowledge, professional skills, and professional attitude, based on the framework by Wen Xiaoqiong (2024).

### ***Reliability and Validity***

Before formal distribution, a pilot test was conducted on 30 vocational teachers, and Cronbach's alpha was used to test the reliability. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was 0.936, indicating good internal consistency. In the formal survey, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the servant leadership and professional development scales were 0.935 and 0.940, respectively, both exceeding the 0.9 threshold.

Validity was evaluated through exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The KMO values were 0.946 and 0.964 for the servant leadership and professional development scales, respectively, both higher than the 0.9 standard. Bartlett's test of sphericity showed significant results ( $p < .001$ ), indicating strong structural validity.

### ***Data Analysis Methods***

After collecting the data, SPSS 26.0 was used for data processing and statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were first used to analyze the general situation of perceived servant leadership and professional development. Independent sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA were used to examine differences among demographic variables. Finally, Pearson correlation analysis and linear regression analysis were conducted to examine the relationship between perceived servant leadership and professional development.

## **Results**

### ***Demographic Analysis of Questionnaire Participants***

A total of 240 valid questionnaires were collected for analysis. Among the respondents, 52.1%

were male and 47.9% were female. In terms of age, 2.9% were aged 25 and below, 32.5% were between 26 and 35, 35.8% were between 36 and 45, 22.9% were between 46 and 55, and 5.8% were 56 and above. Regarding educational background, 80.0% held a bachelor's degree, 16.3% held a master's degree, and 3.8% held a doctoral degree. As for teaching experience, 14.2% had five years or less, 41.3% had 6 to 10 years, 28.7% had 11 to 20 years, and 15.8% had more than 20 years. In terms of professional title, 84.2% held junior titles, 8.3% held mid-level titles, and 7.5% held senior titles. These figures reflect a diverse distribution in demographic background among the participants.

### ***Current Status of Perceived Servant Leadership***

1) To address Research Question 1—What is the current status of teachers perceived servant leadership in X higher vocational colleges in Henan Province? —descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviation were used to analyze the data. As shown in Table 1, the overall mean score for perceived servant leadership was 3.40, indicating a moderate level. The mean scores of all five dimensions ranged between 3.3 and 3.5, reflecting a consistent medium level across dimensions. Among them, “empowerment” and “humility” both had the highest mean score of 3.42, suggesting relatively stronger perceptions in these two areas. In contrast, “altruistic care” had the lowest mean score of 3.35, indicating it was perceived slightly weaker than other dimensions.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistical of Differential Leadership Style of Teachers

Dimension	N	M	SD	Interpretation
Altruistic Care	240	3.35	1.027	Moderate
Empowerment	240	3.42	0.987	Moderate
Vision Building	240	3.41	0.977	Moderate
Humility	240	3.42	0.997	Moderate
Trust	240	3.41	0.974	Moderate
Overall Perceived Servant Leadership	240	3.4	0.897	Moderate

### ***Current Status of Teacher Professional Development***

2) To address Research Question 2—What is the current status of teachers' professional development in X higher vocational colleges in Henan Province? —descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were applied. As shown in Table 2, the overall mean score for professional development was 3.40, indicating a moderate level. All three dimensions scored between 3.3 and 3.5, also falling within the moderate range. “Professional skills” had the highest mean score at 3.43, reflecting stronger competency in practical abilities. In contrast, “professional quality” had the lowest score at 3.37, indicating relatively weaker performance in that area.

**Table 2:** Teacher Professional Development Status

Dimension	N	M	SD	Interpretation
Professional Knowledge	240	3.39	1.062	Moderate
Professional Skills	240	3.43	0.934	Moderate
Professional Quality	240	3.37	0.987	Moderate
Overall Professional Development	240	3.4	0.92	Moderate

### *Differences in Teachers' Perceptions Based on Demographic Variables*

To examine the differences in perceived servant leadership and professional development among teachers in X higher vocational colleges in Henan Province, this study conducted independent sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA. The analyses focused on demographic variables including gender, age, educational background, teaching experience, and professional title.

#### *Gender Differences Analysis*

1) According to Hypothesis H1.1, there were significant differences in perceived servant leadership among teachers of different genders. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare male and female teachers' perceptions of servant leadership and its dimensions. The results indicated a significant difference in the overall perception of servant leadership between genders ( $t=2.897, p<.05$ ). Specifically, all five dimensions—Altruistic Care, Empowerment, Vision Building, Humility, and Trust—showed significant gender differences with p-values less than .05. Hypothesis H1.1 was therefore supported. In terms of mean values, female teachers scored higher than male teachers on all dimensions and on the overall servant leadership scale, suggesting that female teachers were more sensitive and responsive to servant leadership behaviors.

**Table 3:** Gender Differences in Teachers' Perception of Servant Leadership

Variable	Gender	N	M	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Altruistic Care	Male	125	3.34	1.035	3.324	.015*
	Female	115	3.38	1.022		
Empowerment	Male	125	3.41	1.013	2.331	.032*
	Female	115	3.45	0.962		
Vision Building	Male	125	3.41	0.983	3.021	.017*
	Female	115	3.41	0.976		
Humility	Male	125	3.39	1.049	2.454	.030*
	Female	115	3.45	0.943		
Trust	Male	125	3.41	1.032	2.563	.028*
	Female	115	3.41	0.913		
Servant Leadership (Overall)	Male	125	3.39	0.92	2.897	.021*
	Female	115	3.42	0.877		



***Differences in Perceived Servant Leadership Across Demographic Variables (Excluding Gender)***

This study further explored whether teachers' perception of servant leadership varied significantly by age, educational background, teaching experience, and professional title. The ANOVA results indicated no significant differences across age groups in the overall servant leadership perception ( $F = 0.362, p > .05$ ), nor in any of its five dimensions. Similarly, educational background and teaching experience did not show significant differences in teachers' perception of servant leadership, with all  $p$ -values exceeding .05, thereby failing to support Hypotheses H1.2, H1.3, and H1.4.

However, professional title was found to have a significant influence. Specifically, significant differences were observed in the overall perception of servant leadership ( $F = 3.044, p < .05$ ), as well as in four dimensions: altruistic care, empowerment, vision building, and trust. In these aspects, teachers with junior titles scored higher than those with intermediate and senior titles. The humility dimension, however, did not show significant differences ( $F = 1.816, p > .05$ ). These results provided partial support for Hypothesis H1.5, suggesting that teachers' professional titles were associated with their perception of servant leadership.

***Differences in Teachers' Professional Development Across Demographic Variables***

This study also examined whether teachers' professional development varied significantly by gender, age, educational background, teaching experience, and professional title. The  $t$ -test results revealed no significant gender differences in the overall level of professional development or in its three dimensions ( $p > .05$ ). Similarly, ANOVA results showed that none of the demographic variables—including age, educational background, teaching experience, and professional title—had a significant effect on teachers' professional development, as all  $p$ -values were greater than .05. These findings indicated that perceptions of professional development were relatively consistent among teachers, regardless of their demographic backgrounds, and none of the related hypotheses were supported.

***Correlation Analysis Between Servant Leadership and Teachers' Professional Development***

To examine the relationship between perceived servant leadership and teachers' professional development, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The results showed a significant positive correlation between overall servant leadership and teachers' professional development ( $r = .567, p < .01$ ). Moreover, all five dimensions of servant leadership—altruistic calling, empowerment, vision, humility, and trust—were positively correlated with professional development ( $r$  values ranged from .431 to .529, all  $p < .01$ ). These findings suggested that a higher level of perceived servant leadership was associated with a stronger sense of professional development among teachers. The overall relevant situation was shown in Table 4.



**Table 4:** Correlation Between Servant Leadership and Teachers' Professional Development (N = 240)

	Professional Knowledge	Professional Skills	Professional Quality	Professional Development
Altruistic Care	.822**	.814**	.778**	.869**
Empowerment	.774**	.794**	.745**	.833**
Vision Building	.788**	.791**	.730**	.834**
Humility	.811**	.803**	.803**	.865**
Trust	.682**	.678**	.675**	.729**
Perceived Servant Leadership	.874**	.876**	.839**	.931**

Note: \*p&lt;.05, \*\*p&lt;.01, \*\*\*p&lt;.001

## Discussion

### *Current Status of Servant Leadership and Professional Development*

The findings revealed that the perceived level of servant leadership among teachers in vocational colleges in Henan Province was moderate overall. This suggests that while servant leadership has been partially implemented in school management, it has not yet reached a fully mature or pervasive state. Empowerment and humility were perceived most strongly, implying that school leaders may excel at encouraging autonomy and demonstrating modesty. However, the relatively low score for altruistic care indicates a gap in emotional connection and individualized support from leadership. This shortcoming may hinder teachers' sense of value recognition and affect their intrinsic motivation.

Similarly, teachers' professional development was also found to be at a moderate level. While professional skills showed the highest ratings, professional quality—the internalization of teaching values, ethical consciousness, and reflective awareness—was relatively weaker. This imbalance may reflect a focus on operational competence over long-term pedagogical growth, which could ultimately limit educators' ability to innovate or deepen their practice in response to emerging educational demands.

### *Differences Across Demographic Backgrounds*

This study demonstrated that gender and professional title significantly influenced how teachers perceived servant leadership. Female teachers reported higher levels of servant leadership than males, possibly due to greater sensitivity to interpersonal and emotional cues. This aligns with existing literature which suggests that female educators tend to value relational leadership more strongly (Li & Zhang, 2020). In terms of professional titles, junior-ranked teachers perceived significantly higher servant leadership, possibly because they interact more frequently with school leaders during onboarding and rely more on support networks. In contrast, senior teachers may have more autonomy but less frequent administrative engagement, leading to lower perception scores.

On the other hand, age, teaching experience, and educational background showed no significant

differences, indicating that servant leadership perception may not be inherently shaped by life stage or qualifications but rather by contextual factors such as school culture and leadership style. This points to the importance of uniform leadership development strategies across demographics.

Regarding professional development, significant differences were found based on education level and professional title. Teachers with doctoral degrees had the highest overall development scores, reflecting better access to research resources, institutional recognition, and developmental opportunities. Senior teachers also demonstrated higher professional development levels, likely due to accumulated teaching experience, recognition, and participation in school-level academic leadership. Conversely, differences by gender, age, and experience were not significant, which may reflect a relatively stable developmental environment across these categories.

### ***Correlation Between Servant Leadership and Professional Development***

The study showed a strong positive correlation between teachers perceived servant leadership and their professional development. All five dimensions of servant leadership—altruistic care, empowerment, vision building, humility, and trust—were significantly and positively related to the four components of professional development: knowledge, skills, quality, and overall growth. This indicates that when teachers perceive their leaders as empowering, respectful, and trustworthy, they are more likely to engage in continuous learning and self-improvement.

These results are consistent with prior research (e.g., Greenleaf, 1977; Liden et al., 2008) that highlight the role of servant leadership in building psychologically safe work environments that foster intrinsic motivation, collaboration, and long-term development. In the Chinese vocational education context, which is often shaped by hierarchical governance, introducing servant leadership could reshape traditional top-down management models and promote teacher-centered growth. Notably, the strongest correlations were observed between altruistic care and overall professional development, suggesting that emotional and moral support may be a core mechanism linking leadership style and professional outcomes.

### ***Theoretical and Practical Implications***

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by validating servant leadership's applicability in the Chinese vocational education system. While most servant leadership research has focused on Western or general education contexts, this study demonstrates its relevance in institutions that combine technical training with character education. It confirms the multidimensional nature of servant leadership as a predictor of complex professional outcomes.

Practically, the findings suggest a need for leadership training that emphasizes human-centered values. Educational institutions should develop leadership development programs focused on empathy, empowerment, and ethical leadership. At the policy level, education authorities should recognize servant leadership as a strategic asset and embed it into evaluation and promotion frameworks for school leaders. This may include feedback mechanisms from teachers to monitor leadership performance.

Schools should also establish equitable and differentiated professional development opportunities based on teachers' roles, stages, and needs—especially supporting those with limited resources or experience.

### ***Directions for Future Research***

Future research can expand this topic in several meaningful directions. First, longitudinal studies can be conducted to examine how servant leadership impacts professional development over time. This would offer insights into causal mechanisms and the sustainability of leadership interventions. Second, future studies could explore mediating variables such as teacher self-efficacy, job satisfaction, or organizational trust to better understand the pathways through which servant leadership influences teacher outcomes. Third, comparative research across regions or school types (e.g., urban vs. rural, vocational vs. academic) may uncover cultural and structural moderators that influence the effectiveness of servant leadership.

In addition, qualitative research methods such as interviews or case studies could be employed to gain a deeper understanding of how servant leadership is enacted in day-to-day school operations. Teachers' lived experiences, leadership narratives, and organizational routines may reveal subtle mechanisms not captured by quantitative surveys. Lastly, with China's rapid educational reforms and emphasis on teacher quality, examining servant leadership in conjunction with emerging leadership models—such as transformational or distributed leadership—may offer richer theoretical insights and practical strategies.

### **Conclusions**

This study investigated the relationship between teachers' perceived servant leadership and their professional development among instructors at a higher vocational college in Henan Province, China. Based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis, several major conclusions can be drawn:

#### **(1) Overall Perceptions of Servant Leadership and Professional Development**

The results revealed that teachers generally perceived a moderate level of servant leadership from their institutional leaders. Among the five dimensions, empowerment and humility were the most positively evaluated, indicating that leaders tended to support teachers' autonomy and showed a willingness to listen and serve. In contrast, altruistic care received the lowest score, suggesting that emotional support and individualized concern for teachers might be insufficient.

Similarly, teachers' professional development was also found to be at a moderate level. Among the four measured dimensions, professional skills were the most developed, implying a strong emphasis on instructional techniques and subject expertise. Conversely, professional quality, which includes ethical standards and self-reflection, was relatively underdeveloped, indicating a potential area for institutional improvement.

#### **(2) Differences Based on Demographic Variables**

Statistical analysis of demographic variables showed that significant gender differences existed

in teachers' perceptions of servant leadership. Female teachers consistently reported higher scores across all dimensions, indicating they may be more receptive to or more affected by leadership styles characterized by care and support.

Significant differences were also observed by professional title, where teachers with junior titles perceived the highest levels of servant leadership, possibly due to their greater dependence on administrative guidance and support. In contrast, senior-titled teachers showed lower perceptions, which may reflect either a sense of autonomy or a disconnect from leadership practices. No significant differences were found by age, education level, or teaching experience.

In terms of professional development, significant differences were found across education level and professional title. Teachers with doctoral degrees and those with senior titles showed higher levels of development, suggesting that academic qualifications and career advancement are strongly linked to opportunities and motivation for growth. Teachers with master's degrees and junior titles reported lower levels, indicating the need for more targeted support. No significant differences were found in relation to gender, age, or years of teaching.

### (3) Relationship Between Servant Leadership and Professional Development

Correlation analysis demonstrated that teachers perceived servant leadership was significantly and positively associated with their professional development across all measured dimensions. Specifically, the leadership dimensions of altruistic care, empowerment, vision, humility, and trust all had strong positive correlations with teachers' knowledge, skills, qualities, and development outcomes. Among these, empowerment and altruistic care showed the strongest influence, suggesting that when teachers feel respected, trusted, and empowered, they are more likely to invest in their own growth and professional advancement.

This finding underscores the critical role of leadership in shaping teacher development and offers empirical support for promoting servant leadership practices in vocational education settings. Enhancing leaders' ability to serve, support, and empower teachers could be a key strategy for improving teaching quality and long-term professional capacity in higher education institutions.

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