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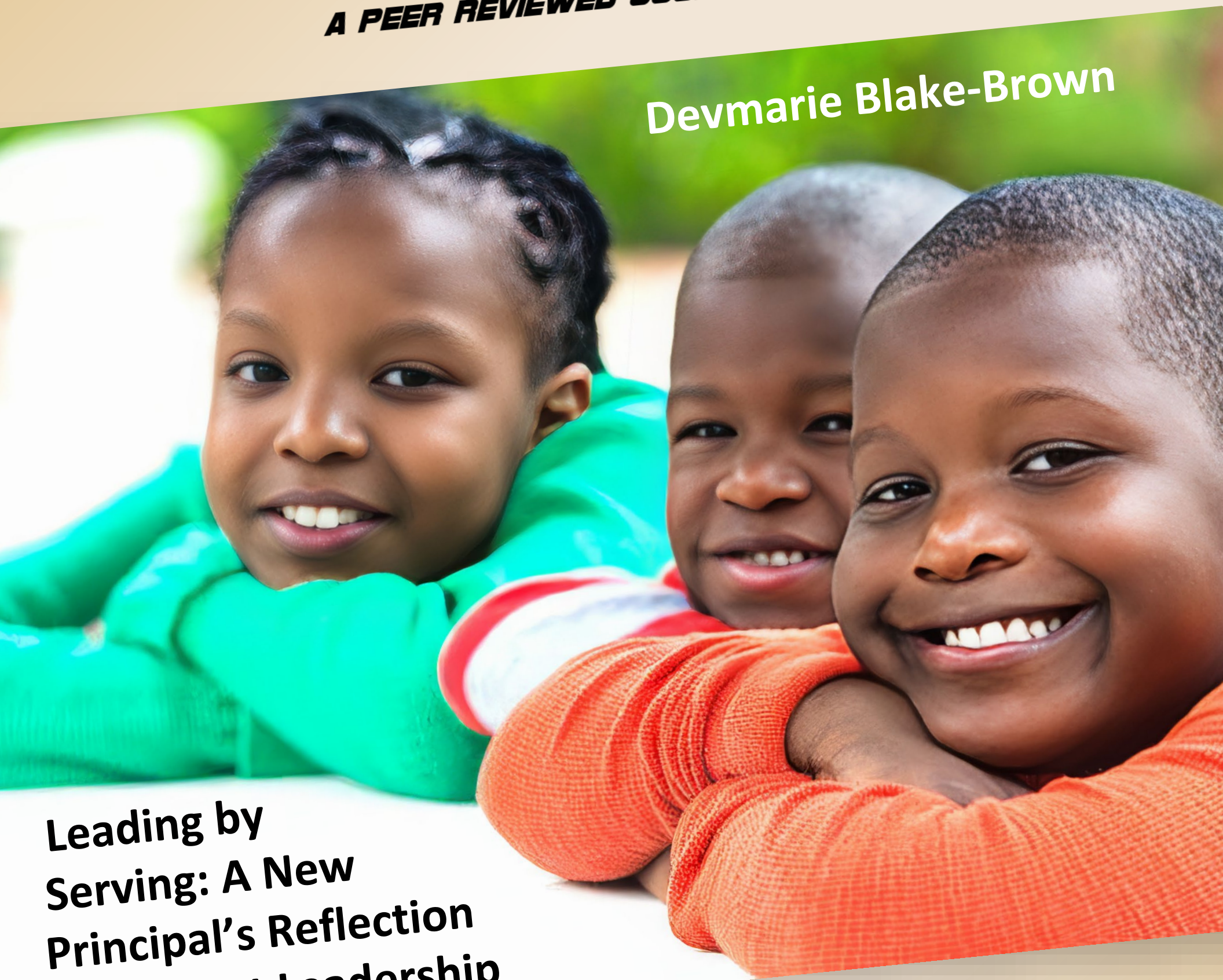
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**Leading by
Serving: A New
Principal's Reflection
on Servant Leadership**

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Leading by Serving: A New Principal's Reflection on Servant Leadership

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Background

When I stepped into the role of principal, I did not see it as a promotion above people. I saw it as a deeper call to serve those who I was called to lead. For me, leadership in a school cannot begin with the title on the office door. It must begin with the people at the gate, in the classroom, in the office, on the compound, in the kitchen, on the board, in the church, in the community, and, most importantly, in the hearts and homes of our children. I distinctly remember the astonishment, followed by the sheer delight, on the face of the first student I encountered when I stopped to help him tie his untied shoelace. Though simple, that act reinforced my belief that true service begins by meeting people where they are and seeking to uplift them one step at a time. It was a small gesture, but it became a powerful reminder that leadership is expressed through everyday acts of care, humility, and presence.

That lesson continues to shape my leadership journey as a new principal. Each day, I am reminded that service is not weakness; it is strength exercised with humility and purpose. One of the clearest examples came during Sports Day, one of the most anticipated events on our school calendar. Unfortunately, severe weather and other unforeseen circumstances left the field waterlogged, placing the event in jeopardy. When a parent and a teacher suggested a way to salvage the field, I immediately picked up a shovel and wheelbarrow and began heaping sand to put onto the surface. Before long, teachers, parents, and community members joined the effort. In that moment, I learned that servant leadership is not about issuing directives from the sidelines; it is about being the first to serve so that others are inspired to serve alongside you.

This commitment to leading through service extends beyond the school gates and into the wider community. Another incident that pops into mind of what servant leadership looks like in reality is when a worker ran into my office to say that a nearby dwelling of a community member was ablaze. I quickly called the Fire Department and then proceeded to jump walls and fences to assist in whatever way I could. One of the workers, unknowingly, was observing my actions and proceeded to blurt out: "Is wha kind a Principal this mon?! (What kind of Principal is this?!) Shi sidung and talk to wi as workers; (She sits and talks with us as workers;) shi go community ded yaawd; (she goes to community funerals;) she on scene of fire, she visit the shut in. (she is at the scene of a fire, she visits the shut-ins.) This Principal different mon. (This Principal is different.)"

Those words resonated because the actions were being carried out instinctively in connection with that innate desire to help/serve others, and they affirmed that people notice authentic leadership. These actions were also impactful. More importantly, the ultimate goal is for my team to understand the leadership style and adopt it in their relationship with all stakeholders.



A Journey of Service and Growth

I began teaching at a young age, and over the years I have served in different school spaces in St. Thomas, Jamaica. My work as Literacy Coordinator became one of the most defining parts of my professional life because it reminded me that no school improves by accident. Improvement comes when people are mobilised, encouraged, trained, and trusted.

I remember being given a young man who was very disruptive at school. He could not read and spent most of his engaging in disruptive behaviours that affected those around him. I decided to work with him, one step at a time. I used my early mornings, my lunchtime, and my evenings to find the best ways to help him leave primary school with the basic skill of reading. Our efforts paid off, and he successfully earned placement at a highly regarded secondary school.

That same commitment to investing in people extended beyond students. I recall a teacher whom I was supervising who was struggling with English Language, which severely impacted her overall performance appraisal. I immediately recognised that she needed a special kind of support and offered to do morning tutoring sessions with her to cover as many grammar and syntax rules as I could. I watched as she learnt, grew in confidence, and became empowered as an educator. A year ago, she sent me a copy of her appraisal where she had done remarkably well and expressed her gratitude for what I did to help her grow as a professional. Moments like these remind me that servant leadership leaves a lasting influence.

Servant leadership is leadership that places people before ego. It does not mean that the leader has no vision, no authority, or no standards. Rather, it means that the leader uses authority to build people, not to break them. It means the principal asks: What do my teachers need in order to teach well? What do my students need in order to learn well? What do my parents need in order to support the school? What does the community need in order to trust us? What does the institution need in order to grow?

Recent research supports this approach. Ouyang et al. (2026) found that servant leadership in education is closely connected to teacher well-being, professional engagement, positive behaviour, performance, and a more harmonious school environment. These findings resonate deeply with my own experience as a school leader. I recall my secretary saying recently that I needed a sign on my door to lessen the parade of visitors who came seeking support and guidance. This is because I create a space that enables everyone to feel safe expressing themselves and discussing how I can best assist them in carrying out their responsibilities. My favourite sentence is often: “How can I help?”

How can I Help?



That simple question embodies my philosophy of leadership because a school cannot rise higher than the emotional and professional health of the people who serve in it. I have found that when my teachers feel seen, supported, and motivated, they report to work ready to give their fullest creativity. When my ancillary staff feel visible, they not only complete what is required, but often ask if I need help with additional tasks, motivated by their love for the institution. When my parents are heard and incorporated into decisions, they become active partners in the school's growth and development. When students feel heard and valued, they embrace the help we are trying to give. Ultimately, servant leadership is what helps to create this kind of culture, one where people feel valued, supported, and inspired to contribute to the collective success of the school.

Learning from Exemplary Leadership

I have also seen this people-centred approach in the leadership of a fellow colleague, who is the Acting Principal of a prominent high school in my hometown. I taught at that institution prior to my new role as principal, and I would watch as she made a deliberate effort to stop and speak to everyone she encountered, asking how they were and making suggestions or offering to help in whatever way she could. It was profound because this ritual would include everyone, from the clerical staff, to the bus driver, to the security guards, to students, to parents, and to teachers. No one she encountered was left without a “check-in.”

One conversation with her led me to the term “servant leadership” as I tried to define her leadership style. She did not lead from distance alone. She led by connection. She understood that the staffroom was not just a place where teachers sat between classes; it was one of the emotional engines of the school. She recognised that when staff members feel that their leader listens, understands, and advocates for them, they are more likely to go beyond the minimum. They become more willing to collaborate, to solve problems, and to give the extra effort that school life so often demands. Observing her leadership helped me to appreciate one of the great strengths of servant leadership: it creates loyalty without forcing it. It builds commitment without intimidation. It encourages excellence without making people feel disposable.



Balancing Service with Vision

My role as Sunday School Director has also shaped how I understand leadership. Sunday school leadership teaches patience. It teaches that every child learns differently, every family carries a story, and every person needs both guidance and grace. In that setting, leadership is not about standing above people; it is about walking beside them. It is about preparing, nurturing, correcting, encouraging, and helping others discover purpose.

Research on religious values and servant leadership also supports this connection. Hossain et al. (2024) found that principals’ religious values and servant leadership can positively influence teacher satisfaction, with servant leadership acting as an important bridge between values and workplace outcomes. This does not mean that a principal should impose religion on a school. It means that values such as humility, compassion, fairness, forgiveness, service, and moral responsibility can positively shape how people experience leadership.

For me, Sunday school service and school leadership are connected by one truth: people grow best where they are loved, challenged, and believed in. However, it would be dishonest to suggest that everyone will approve of this style. Some people believe that a principal must be feared in order to be effective. They may see kindness as softness, consultation as uncertainty, and humility as a lack of authority. In some school cultures, people are accustomed to top-down leadership where instructions are given and questions are discouraged. In such spaces, servant leadership may be misunderstood. Some may even try to take advantage of it.

This is the flip side that every servant leader must face. If the leader serves without boundaries, the school may become disorganized. If the leader listens but never decides, progress may be delayed. If the leader is compassionate but avoids accountability, standards may fall. If the leader is always available but never replenished, burnout may follow. Servant leadership is powerful, but it must not become people-pleasing. A servant leader must still make difficult decisions, address poor performance, protect children, enforce policy, and maintain order. In that sense, servant leadership must be guided by wisdom. It must be kind, but not careless. It must be humble, but not timid. It must be inclusive, but not indecisive. It must serve all stakeholders, but it must also protect the mission of the school.

This is where servant leadership and transformational leadership are often compared. Transformational leadership focuses on vision, inspiration, innovation, and change. A transformational principal motivates staff to believe in a bigger future for the school. This style is useful, especially when a school needs renewed energy, improved performance, a stronger culture, and a shared sense of purpose. Research by Heenan et al. (2023) found that transformational school leadership positively influences staff motivation, collaboration, school culture, organizational commitment, and teacher confidence. In many ways, transformational leadership asks: *Where are we going, and how can I inspire others to help us get there?*

Servant leadership asks a slightly different question: *Who are the people on this journey, and how can I help them grow as we move?* The two styles are not enemies. In fact, schools need both. A principal must be transformational enough to cast vision and servant-hearted enough to carry people with care. Transformational leadership can move a school towards change, but servant leadership helps people feel safe enough to participate in that change. Transformational leadership may focus strongly on goals, innovation, and performance. Servant leadership focuses strongly on trust, development, empathy, and relationships. One says, “Let us rise to a higher vision.” The other says, “Let me help you become strong enough to rise.”

The danger of transformational leadership, if it is not balanced, is that people may feel used for the vision. The danger of servant leadership, if it is not balanced, is that the vision may become weak because the leader is trying too hard to accommodate everyone. The wise principal learns to blend the two: serve people deeply, but still lead them forward boldly. At Bath Primary, my desire is to serve in a way that produces results. I do not want servant leadership to be only a beautiful phrase. I want it to be seen in literacy improvement, stronger teaching, better student behaviour, deeper parent involvement, cleaner and safer school spaces, improved morale, and children who leave us more confident than when they came. I want it to be seen in boys and girls who are given targeted support, in teachers who receive training and encouragement, in parents who feel welcome, and in community members who understand that they are partners in the work.

To serve all stakeholders does not mean that everyone will always agree with the principal. It means that every decision should be made with the welfare of the school community at heart. Sometimes service looks like listening. Sometimes it looks like saying no. Sometimes it looks like giving another chance. Sometimes it looks like insisting on accountability. Sometimes it looks like standing alone for what is right. In the end, the principal is not merely the person who signs documents, chairs meetings, or gives instructions at devotion. The principal is the chief culture-builder. The tone of the school often follows the tone of the leader. If the leader is arrogant, fear spreads. If the leader is careless, standards fall. If the leader is distant, people disconnect. But if the leader serves with courage, listens with intention, corrects with fairness, and leads with vision, the school becomes a place where people feel that they belong.

Servant leadership is not the easiest path. It requires emotional strength, spiritual grounding, professional discipline, and constant reflection. It asks the principal to lead with both heart and backbone. It demands that we serve without losing authority and correct without losing compassion. As a new principal, this is the kind of leader I am striving to become: one who serves the child who struggles to read, the teacher who needs encouragement, the parent who needs guidance, the staff member who feels overlooked, the community member who wants to help, and the board member who carries responsibility for governance.

Leadership, at its best, is not about how many people stand when the principal enters the room. It is about how many people rise because the principal has served them well. And if, through servant leadership, even one child reads better, one teacher feels renewed, one parent becomes more involved, one staff member feels valued, and one school community becomes stronger, then service will not have been a soft option. It will have been the strongest leadership choice of all.



Key Lessons for Aspiring School Leaders

As I reflect on my first year of school leadership, I recognize that this journey has been one of continuous learning, growth, and self-discovery. While I do not claim to have all the answers, the experiences, challenges, successes, and relationships I have encountered have shaped my understanding of what it means to lead with purpose. The following five principles are among the most valuable lessons I have learnt, and they continue to guide my leadership practice.

School ethos is critical to the leadership style demonstrated, hence, a leader must understand his/her school culture and operate accordingly.

Listen to your staff. Every voice matters and how they feel often impacts their productivity. Create a space that encourages them to respectfully air their thoughts/feelings.

It is not uncommon to utilize more than one leadership style. Sometimes a shift in school dynamics requires a shift in leadership style.

Adopting a leadership style should not compromise your principles as you lead an institution, but rather complement it. In essence, stay true to who you are as a leader and as an ordinary individual.

Self-Assessment and self-monitoring is critical as a leader as you seek to achieve institutional goal/s. Therefore, if there is low productivity and limited involvement of stakeholders then it will do no harm to analyze your leadership style for effectiveness.

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Devmarie Blake-Brown is the Principal of Bath Primary School and a distinguished Jamaican educator with over 25 years of service. Recognized by the Ministry of Education as a Teacher of Excellence, she has held key leadership roles and presented internationally on sustainable education. She has been featured on TVJ, The Gleaner, JIS Magazine and The Pitch for her contributions to education and community development. Notably, she has prepared students as young as 11 and 12 to earn Range 2 passes in the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) English A, demonstrating her commitment to exceptional learner achievement. A devoted Pentecostal Christian, she has served as a Sunday School Leader for more than 15 years and volunteers in adult literacy, national reading competitions, and HEART/NSTA Trust training. Deeply committed to community development, she organizes annual back-to-school drives and Christmas treats. Her leadership, service and outreach continue to make a meaningful impact on education and community life in Jamaica. 

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