

Taking it Outside the School Library: Teacher-Librarians as School and District Leaders

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a study of the experiences of six female teacher-librarians who are now in leadership positions as assistant principals and school/university consultants. These TL leaders were working as district consultants, assistant principals, and as a university teaching and learning consultant. All TL leaders had classroom experience, teacher-librarianship experience, and had been teacher leaders in their schools. The TL leaders were using their unique skills and experiences to provide professional development and instructional leadership. More research is needed about how the experience of being a teacher-librarian shapes formal leadership roles.

Keywords: *teacher-librarians, teacher leaders, leadership, assistant principals, consultants*

Introduction

According to American Association of School Librarians' (AASL) (2009) *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs*, today's school librarian (teacher-librarian) is a teacher, an instructional partner, an information specialist, a program administrator, and a leader (pp. 16-18). It is no surprise, then, that teacher-librarians are moving into formal leadership roles in their schools and school districts. This study seeks to understand how teacher-librarians (TLs) experience formal school and district leadership roles. It presents the findings from in-depth interviews with six former teacher-librarians who are now working as school and district leaders. For this paper, we will call these people TL Leaders and we will use the term teacher-librarian to refer to those who have qualifications in both education (teaching) and librarianship.

Research Question

The research question guiding this study was *How do TL Leaders experience formal school and district leadership roles?* Sub-questions included: What kinds of formal leadership roles do teacher-librarians take on in their schools and school districts? How did they come to be in these leadership roles? What previous classroom and teacher-librarian experiences do these TL Leaders bring to their leadership roles? What are the major responsibilities of these TL Leaders?

Literature Review

Defining, describing and understanding leadership is important but elusive (Neely, 2001). York-Barr and Duke (2004) in their review of literature about teacher leadership noted that the “unique and varied capacities of individual teachers must be matched with unique and varied leadership functions” (Implications for Practice of Teacher Leadership, para. 5). The importance of building leadership skills for teacher-librarians is highlighted in the American Library Association/American Association of School Librarians’ (ALA/AASL) (2010) *Standards for Initial Preparation of School Librarians* (Standard 4). Yet, very little is known about the experiences of teacher-librarians who take on formal leadership roles.

Research has explored how to prepare pre-service teacher-librarians for leadership (Dotson & Jones, 2011; Mardis & Everhart, 2014; Smith, 2014, 2013) and there is research that indicates that current and potential leaders can be taught leadership skills (Bennis & Nanus, 2003). The work of Jones & Bush (2009) begins a discussion of the most necessary professional dispositions of school librarians (teacher-librarians) and uses the definition of Katz (1993) to define a disposition as “a tendency to exhibit frequently, consciously, and voluntarily a pattern of behavior that is directed to a broad goal” (para. 3). Kimmel, Dickinson and Doll (2012) continued this examination of dispositions by conducting research with three focus groups of seventy-one practicing school librarians. They found through their analysis a Dispositional Continua as seen below:

- From Expertise to Advocacy
- From Library-based to Community-based
- From Affable to Open
- From Cooperative to Collaborative
- From Ethical to Modeling Ethics
- From Love of Learning to Professional Growth
- From Facilitative to Flexible. (Kimmel, Dickinson, & Doll, 2012, Findings, para. 1)

The authors believe, “in the context of school library education, we see the need for faculty to model dispositions and also for faculty to create experiences that challenge and scaffold students as they practice behaviors that are evidence of dispositions and to reflect on those behaviours” (Kimmel, Dickinson, & Doll, 2012, Conclusions, para. 2).

Roles and Responsibilities of Assistant Principals and District Consultants

While we could find no specific research about the transition from teacher-librarian to assistant principal or district consultant, there is much to learn from research on the transition from teacher to assistant principal. Armstrong (2010; 2014; 2015) noted that when teachers consider becoming administrators they begin to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that reflect administrators’ work. Armstrong (2010), in a study of eight new vice-principals, found that the “vice-principal’s individual narratives depicted unique journeys that were influenced by a variety of personal, professional and organizational factors” (p. 696). Riveros, Newton, and da Costa (2013) noted that many classroom teachers in informal leadership positions are hesitant to move into a leadership role, as they fear losing their connection to the classroom. Additionally, their study found that teachers gain experience in leadership positions within their own schools, which builds their capacity and promotes their leadership capabilities (Riveros, Newton, & da Costa, 2013). During the first year on the job, vice-principals must change their thinking from that of a classroom teacher to focus on the entire school district (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012).

Barnett, Shoho and Oleszewski (2012) highlight three realities of the role of the assistant principal: the

ability to manage time and performance expectations, the need to develop working relationships with colleagues in the school, and the importance of understanding curriculum and instruction (p. 155-116). Hausmann, Nebeker, McCreary and Donaldson (2002) asked assistant principals to self-report on the following roles: instructional leadership, personnel management, interactions with education hierarchy, professional development, resource management, public relations, and student management. Assistant principals “devoted their largest portion of time to student management” (Hausmann et al., 2002, p. 147) followed by interacting with education hierarchy and personnel management. Interestingly, female assistant principals “report significantly higher engagement in professional development activities than males as well as more involvement as instructional leaders” (Hausmann et al., 2002, p. 148).

The specific roles and duties of assistant principals differ in each school and school district (Watson, 2005) Studies from around the world indicate the duties of an assistant principal may include, but are not limited to, resource and student management, teacher growth and development, classroom observations, and instructional leadership (Busch, MacNeil, & Baraniuk, 2010; Gerke, 2004; Marshall, 1993). Kwan (2009) categorized the roles of the assistant principal into the following dimensions: “external communication and connection, quality assurance and accountability, teaching, learning, and curriculum, staff management, resource management, leader and teacher growth and development, and strategic direction and policy environment” (p. 202).

Research tells us that there are many reasons why a teacher might want to move into a leadership position. Hohner and Riveros (2017) found that “increased responsibilities and professional growth were motivators for teachers to enter administration” (Conclusion, para. 1). Armstrong (2010) noted that while teachers may be ready to seek a new challenge, “crossing the boundary between teaching and administration precipitates a challenging cognitive, emotional, and social journey across uncharted personal, professional, and organizational territory” (p. 4). Early on in the administrative role, new vice-principals are likely to experience a cultural shift that is “characterized by a sense of dislocation and feelings of ambiguity” (Armstrong, 2015, p. 113). In her interviews with vice-principals, Armstrong (2015) found that “all of the vice-principals reported that they felt they did not belong in this new role or environment during the early months of their transition” (p. 113). The vice-principals shared a sense of displacement as they relinquished their classroom teaching role and left behind relationships with students and colleagues for their new administrative role (Armstrong, 2015).

Research about teacher leadership may also inform our understanding of how TL Leaders experience school, university, and district leadership roles. Wenner and Campbell (2017) define teacher leaders as “teachers who maintain K-12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom” (p. 140). In their review of teacher leadership research, Wenner and Campbell noted that the factors that facilitate teacher leadership are: external training and support for teacher leaders, support from administration, climate and structural factors that better allow teacher leaders to do their work, and clear-cut job responsibilities and recognition for meeting those responsibilities (p. 153). Wenner and Campbell also identified factors that do not support teacher leadership: lack of time, poor relationships with peers and/or administration, climate and structural factors, and personal characteristics (p. 154). York-Barr and Duke (2004) noted readiness factors for teacher leadership included: excellent professional teaching skills, a clear and well-developed personal philosophy of education, being in a career stage that enables one to give to others, having an interest in adult development, and being in a personal life stage that allows one time and energy to assume a position of leadership” (Who are Teacher Leaders, para. 3).

Methodology and Research Design

This generic qualitative research study involved in-depth interviews with six Teacher-Librarian Leaders (TL Leaders). All of the participants were classroom teachers and teacher-librarians prior to moving into leadership roles in their schools/university or districts. The participants were also all graduates of a part-time online graduate level teacher-librarianship education program at a large Canadian university. The participants were all women who had been classroom teachers with five to 20 years of classroom teaching experience. The participants all lived and worked in Western Canadian provinces and worked in elementary, junior high, and senior high school settings in medium and large urban centres.

Qualitative research examines the world of lived experience by looking at how “social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 14). According to Merriam (2009), generic qualitative research, also called basic or interpretive qualitative research, “attempts to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 23). In a generic qualitative study, the researcher is attentive to the alignment of the research question, the methodological choices, and the research methods (Kahlke, 2014). Using an interview-based research approach resulted in rich data and thick descriptions which allowed participants’ voices to be maintained.

This research paper presents some of the findings from this generic qualitative research study. Research ethics approval was received prior to beginning this study. In-person and online interviews were conducted in 2019 and were recorded and the researchers made detailed notes from each interview. The interviews were transcribed and the transcripts were analyzed by looking for common themes and trends that emerged across questions and throughout the comments (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1998). The overarching goal for analysis was to purposively examine themes within the case (Yin, 2013).

Findings

This research study investigated the question: How do TL Leaders experience formal school/university and district leadership roles? This section will present findings from six in-depth interviews with Teacher-Librarian Leaders (TL Leaders) who are currently working in a variety of formal leadership roles. Findings from this study related to the following sub-questions are presented: What kinds of formal leadership roles do teacher-librarians take on in their schools/university and school districts? How did they come to be in these leadership roles? What previous classroom and teacher-librarian experiences do these TL Leaders bring to their leadership roles? What are the major responsibilities of these TL Leaders? Each question is presented below with major themes identified from the participants’ interviews. Representative quotations to highlight the themes are also included.

Formal leadership roles

All of the participants in this study have taken on formal leadership roles in their schools/university and districts (and in one case, outside their school district). Three participants were working as school district consultants or coordinators, with responsibility for educational technology or school libraries. For example, one participant, who has been in this role for 4 years, told the researchers that she was *“one of ten district coordinators. My focus was teacher-librarianship, educational technology, and inquiry learning. In that role, what we did was a lot of workshops for teachers, finding resources and making them available on our intranet. We did a lot helping teachers if they had questions, co-teaching, co-mentoring, working together as a group to say here is the new curriculum what are some ways to make it easier to implement it?”*

Another participant stated that her *“current leadership role is a district consultant for technology integration planning and support. I work with two catchments in my district. We are divided into six catchments approximately 38 schools and my work is with principals and teachers helping them to integrate technology into their teaching and learning.”*

A third participant works as “the District Library Learning Commons Coordinator,...where I support teacher-librarians and teachers as well as leading the District Learning Commons.”

Two participants are currently assistant principals in elementary (Kindergarten to grade 6) schools. One of these participants is beginning her second year in this role, while the other participant is a brand new assistant principal. Finally, one participant chose to leave her role as a district consultant in Canada to move overseas and take a leadership role at a post-secondary institution. She stated that her role involves supporting

“academic teaching staff at my University, as well as academic teaching staff from universities [in another country], with improving their pedagogical and didactical skills. I am also working on a project with 5 universities in the Philippines to help develop a Masters program for educators who will be potentially working in challenging situations (ie: extreme remote locations, high poverty, etc.). I support with instructional design of MOOCs for a variety of international projects involving my university as well.”

All of the TL Leaders who participated in this study have taken on formal leadership roles after working in classrooms and school libraries. The next section will present information about the previous roles these participants had prior to taking on their leadership roles.

Previous classroom and teacher-librarian experiences

Each of the six participants in this study were teachers and teacher-librarians prior to taking on formal leadership roles. The participants told the researchers that they had previous experiences including:

- Classroom teaching (K-12)
- Teacher-Librarian
- School & District Educational Technology Lead / Technology Coordinator / Integration Specialist
- Levelled literacy intervention lead teacher
- Literacy lead teacher
- Curriculum Coordinator
- High School Department Head
- Virtual School Coordinator
- Provincial Educational Technology Consultant
- Teacher-in-Charge: “When a school doesn’t have a Vice Principal they assign a teacher in charge. When the principal is away you take on that role.”
- Sessional instructor for post-secondary education programs
- Executive roles on provincial teacher-librarianship associations

Participants described their classroom teaching and school library experiences as valuable in preparing them for leadership roles. For example, one participant stated that

“as a teacher-librarian, I needed to build trust with my colleagues in order to have them collaborate with me. I needed to be good at finding, ‘just in time, just enough, just for me’ resources for their projects. I needed to have a solid background in educational pedagogy in order to plan meaningful, relevant lessons and units that align with the curriculum, and help to co-teach them. All of these skills transfer beautifully into my new role [as a district consultant]. The fact that I AM a teacher and have DONE all of the things I suggest to people is incredibly beneficial. Much of what I share comes from experience, not just from reading books and articles (although I do a lot of this as well). I love to experiment with new strategies and resources. As a teacher-librarian, you have the opportunity to do this because you are working with many different people on many different things, and that also works well for me in my new role.”

Another participant credited her experience as a teacher-librarian for being instrumental in her being hired as an assistant principal. She stated that *“I believe being a TL for 8 years was definitely the first introduction to becoming a teacher leader. I then applied and became our school division’s Library Learning Commons Consultant and Educational Technology Consultant for 3 years. Without a doubt, this role gave me the confidence and skills to embark on becoming a VP.”* A final participant noted that she has

“taught everything from K-7, in both public and Indigenous schools, and this gave me knowledge of curriculum, classroom management strategies, and more for a wide variety of age/grade levels. It also gave me “street credibility” with my colleagues. As a teacher-librarian, I developed a lot of interpersonal and collaboration skills, and more strategies for coaching adults. I continued to grow these skills as a technology coordinator and as a presenter/speaker. All of this has laddered into being the experience I needed to work in the role that I am in now [in post-secondary education].”

The participants in this study all came to their formal leadership roles with many years of experience working in classrooms and school libraries, as well as having had school-level leadership roles. Many of them also identified volunteer roles in their provincial school library associations as critical in their leadership development. All of these experiences led them to more formal roles as district consultants, school administrators, and post-secondary educators. The next section will present findings that identify the specific ways in which formal leadership roles became available to the participants in this study.

Taking on Leadership Roles

The participants in this study were asked to identify some of the ways in which their formal leadership roles became available to them. All of the participants identified their teacher-librarianship training as being integral to having the opportunity to take on formal leadership roles. Each of the participants in this study graduated from the same graduate level teacher-librarianship education program and many credit this experience the beginning of their leadership journey. For example, one participant noted that her MED in Teacher-Librarianship *“transformed my path as an educator and role in the district. I took on more leadership roles within the school and took on more in the district as the teacher librarian.”*

Working as a teacher-librarian directly led to more formal leadership roles for most of the participants in this study. For example, one person noted that *“I came to this leadership role through my role as a teacher librarian. As a teacher-librarian, I was working a lot with technology, with inquiry and with developing ways to get students to be able to use inquiry and use technology, to deepen and understand their inquiry.”* For one participant, working as a teacher-librarian and becoming passionate about makerspaces through that role, led her to taking on a role as a district consultant for educational technology. She notes that:

“I became passionate about makerspaces and actually brought to my district the idea of loaning out Makerspace kits so that all schools could participate in the idea of Makerspace learning without first investing heavily in the funds. Through that work, I spent a summer building the Makerspace Kits a few years ago. When this [district consultant] position came up I decided to apply for it and I believe my work as a teacher-librarian with Makerspace kits, working with inquiry and technology, helped me to get that role.”

Similarly, the participants credited being involved in teacher-librarian associations at the district and provincial levels as critical for developing confidence in their leadership ability. One participant noted that *“I became the chair [of my district’s teacher-librarianship group]. We planned meetings, planned professional sessions, and had a great list-serve. Then I got involved with [our provincial teacher-librarianship association]. I was the chapter counselor there and involved with the executive there. All that lead to me applying for the district coordinator role.”*

Finally, another participant identified her work as a district level consultant as being the reason she was placed in a role as an assistant principal in an elementary school. She noted that *"I didn't personally request to move [to this school]. But I was placed there after having worked at central office for four years. So I think there's something about some of the opportunities that I have had at central office that they felt would be a good fit as an assistant principal, and particularly for that school."*

All of the participants in this study attributed their success in moving into formal leadership roles to a variety of factors, including: formal teacher-librarianship training, previous work experience as a classroom teacher and teacher-librarian, and roles in local and provincial professional associations. These experiences helped them develop the skills they needed to take on formal leadership roles and prepare them for the responsibilities involved in these new leadership opportunities.

Major responsibilities

The participants in this study were asked to describe some of the major responsibilities that are part of their leadership roles. Depending on the leadership role, participants identified several key elements of each of their roles. For example, the district consultants/coordinators indicated that one major responsibility of their roles is leading projects at a district level. One participant talked about a project she leads annually which was a *"one day workshop for teachers to jump start their year. More than 140 teachers attend these end of summer workshops and [I] make sure we have workshops available for K-12 teachers, including the fine arts and math teachers. We make sure there is a variety of workshops which meet their different needs."* Similarly, another district consultant indicated that she oversees *"a series of special events in the district designed to 'spark the brilliance in all learners', including Elementary Chess Challenge, Secondary Poetry Slam, Visual and Performing Arts Showcase, and Young Authors' Conference."*

Another role that coordinators or consultants take on is building relationships throughout the district. For example, one consultant indicated that she met with one of the district Assistant Superintendents once a week and also met with all the coordinators bi-weekly to talk *"about projects, who can help, and who can take the lead on the projects."*

In addition to building relationships and leading projects, consultants also work with classroom teachers to integrate technology into their teaching. One participant indicated that she also *"has to do research to look at new technologies and try to understand how they can be helpful for teaching and learning."* Similarly, another consultant works closely with school library staff to *"facilitate the continuing shift from traditional library to library learning commons both in school libraries and the district resource centre—now called the District Learning Commons (DLC). I support teacher-librarians in the district by mentoring new T/Ls, arranging in-service, leading learning projects/grants (ex. Reconciliation in the learning commons and What does maker mean in [our district]), and advocating for LLCs at the school and district level."*

That same consultant support teachers *"through the District Learning Commons. I curate a district collection of teacher resource materials that include books, book sets, kits (hands-on materials to use in classes), and virtual resources. I also coordinate learning opportunities and events in the district. One thing I'm working on right now is our district's participation in the DEAR (Drop Everything And Read). I have also set up district-wide teacher book clubs."*

The two participants who work as assistant principals indicated that their roles are diverse in terms of leadership. One assistant principal noted that she *"takes on many responsibilities [in her role]. I think every school admin partnership is unique. In my case I am very fortunate to work with a principal who believes we are a team and partners in leading our staff. I find myself taking on responsibilities that are my strengths...technology needs, supporting new staff, literacy programming, professional development ideas and execution, managerial tasks (timetabling, recess duty*

scheduling, etc.) and [other] duties as assigned.”

Similarly, another participant who was a brand new assistant principal noted that it is

“difficult and easy to pinpoint specific portfolios, because I think it’s sometimes easy to say, You’re in charge of facilities, or you’re in charge of like technology requests, or you’re in charge of classified staff, like those things are kind of easy to say. So I think that there are some very defined scopes of responsibility. But I think there’s lots of responsibility that’s not defined. And I think that’s where things can kind of be interesting. The space of leadership is often in connecting people to each other and connecting people to teaching practices and to students. So leadership looks like how we can get people connected to kids, to teaching, to other people, to methodology, to finding what people need to make them more successful. And so that’s probably the undefined leadership role, which is way more interesting and way more integral to the daily work.”

The participant who previously worked as a district consultant and is now working in educational technology at a post-secondary institution described the characteristics of her role as including

“instructional design, curriculum development, training, support, interviews, professional portfolio evaluation, and advice [to instructors].”

This study found that TL leaders came to their leadership roles for a variety of reasons. Some participants felt that their move into a leadership role was a natural progression from their work as a teacher leader. Several participants mentioned their graduate work as important to giving them the foundations they needed to take on leadership roles in schools and districts. Participants working as consultants at the school district level found that their experiences building relationships and developing workshops and understanding the bigger picture of school and district-level issues and trends contributed to their understanding of and appreciation for potential leadership roles.

Discussion

This study documents the experiences of six teacher-librarians who have moved into leadership roles in their schools/university and districts. Like York-Barr and Duke (2004) and Armstrong (2010) noted each of the TL leaders in this study are in leadership roles that match their unique skills. These TL Leaders were working as school district/university consultants, and assistant principals with experience as classroom teachers and teacher-librarians. All were previously teacher leaders in their schools as defined by Wenner and Campbell (2017). Participants in this study talked about their work as teacher leaders “building trust with colleagues,” “building street credibility,” developing “interpersonal and collaboration skills,” and “coaching adults.” All of these TL leaders gained leadership experience in their own schools in their roles as teacher-librarians (Riveros, Newton, & da Costa, 2013). In their roles as teacher-librarians they had had already shifted their focus away from the classroom to focus on the whole school. This likely made the transition to their leadership roles a little easier (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012).

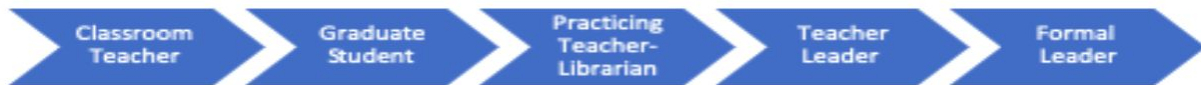
The consultants in this study engaged in many of the traditional roles and duties as found in the research about assistant principals. Participants engaged in organizing and offering professional development sessions, building relationships working directly with teachers, mentoring teachers, providing access to resources, and doing further research. One of the assistant principals in this study noted that she was taking on “responsibilities that are my strength” while the other assistant principal noted that “the space of leadership is often in connecting people to each other and connecting people to teaching practices and to students.” These roles and responsibilities mapped on to the self-reported roles as presented by Hausmann, Nebeker, McCreary and Donaldson (2002). It is especially interesting that these six female participants all mentioned professional development and instructional leadership as being part of their roles (either current or previous).

Implications and Conclusions

This study provides a starting point for understanding the experiences of TL leaders in roles such as assistant principals and consultants. TL leaders bring their unique skills to their leadership roles and for some the move into a leadership role was a natural progression from their work as a teacher leader. Several participants mentioned their graduate work as important to giving them the foundations they needed to take on leadership roles in schools and districts. More research is needed to better understand the reasons why teacher-librarians move into leadership roles. How does a graduate degree and then experience as a teacher-librarian contribute to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for formal leadership roles? How do the experiences building relationships and developing workshops and understanding the bigger picture of school and district-level issues and trends contribute to a teacher-librarian's understanding of and appreciation for potential leadership roles? What dispositions are important for leadership roles in schools and school districts and how do these compare to those identified by Kimmel et al. (2012) for teacher-librarians?

As we develop curriculum and design learning activities for teacher-librarian preparation programs we need to consider and understand a teacher-librarian's career lifecycle.

A Teacher-Librarian's Career Lifecycle



As noted by Dotson & Jones (2011),

The change we seek is to create [teacher-]librarians who are educational leaders, change agents in the curriculum and instructional process, and partners at both the local school and wider global communities. Library schools have begun a new era charged to inaugurate a new generation of school librarians ready to serve as leaders in their schools. (Discussion, para. 8).

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