

**Jennifer L. Branch-Mueller; Joanne Rodger**

University of Alberta; University of Alberta

[jbranch@ualberta.ca](mailto:jbranch@ualberta.ca); [joanne.rodger@ualberta.ca](mailto:joanne.rodger@ualberta.ca)

## **“Single threads woven together in a tapestry”: Dispositions of Teacher-Librarian Leaders**

### **Abstract**

This generic qualitative research study examined if and how the dispositions of six exemplary teacher-librarians evolve after a move into a formal leadership role. All of the participants were classroom teachers and teacher-librarians prior to moving into leadership roles in their schools/university or districts. Findings from this study are organized and presented based on the leadership dispositions identified by Kimmel, Dickinson and Doll (2012) in their Dispositional Continua and include descriptors used by teacher-librarian leaders that help clarify each disposition. Further research is needed to create a valid and reliable disposition assessment tool for pre-service and in-service teacher librarians and TL leaders.

**Keywords:** leadership, dispositions, assessment tools

### **Introduction**

Teacher-librarians are often seen as teacher leaders in their schools. They engage in professional development for teachers, instructional leadership, and collaboration. They have expertise in technology and are capable researchers and problem-solvers. It shouldn't be a surprise then, that teacher-librarians may move from informal leadership roles in their schools to more formal leadership roles as administrators or district consultants. However, very little is known about how teacher-librarians experience leadership roles in their schools and school districts. This study will specifically examine if and how the dispositions of exemplary teacher-librarians evolve after a move into a leadership role. This paper will present findings from in-depth interviews with school and district leaders who were formerly teacher-librarians (who we will call TL leaders).

### **Statement of Research Problem**

The overarching research questions for this research study are:

1. How do TL Leaders experience their leadership roles?
2. What dispositions do TL leaders bring to and demonstrate in their leadership roles?

### **Literature Review**

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Defining, describing, and understanding leadership is important but elusive (Neely, 2001). Jones and Long (2019) remind us that it is more important than ever for teacher-librarians to “step into a leadership role to turn the tide in school librarianship” (p. 18). There is research to help us understand the leadership role of the teacher-librarian. Everhart (2007) stated that “the concept of school library media specialists as effective school leaders has taken on increased professional importance and visibility throughout the library profession” (p. 56). Cannell (2017) tells us that school librarians “create strong connections between people and ideas that allow for integrated work to occur” or act as central figures who “provide others with the information, resources, skills, or even relationships needed to develop strong learning opportunities leading to student success” (p. 94). Instructional leadership is also a key component of the leadership role of the teacher librarian. Cannell (2017) presents a continuum from supporting others to collaborating with others to be fully embedded in curriculum work with teachers (p. 47).

Johnston (2015) explores distributed leadership theory as a way to examine the experiences of teacher-librarians as leaders and suggests “(1) that there are aspects of a situation that can enable or constrain leadership practice and (2) that leadership emerges from the interactions of the different individuals within a group where essential skills and knowledge are dispersed among many” (p. 52). DiScala & Subramanian (2011) argue that for their “role to be fully realized both within the profession and by teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders, school librarians must use evidence-based practice (EBP) in coordination with their leadership” (p. 67). A survey of recent graduates of a school librarian program “exposed a wide variety of leadership activities” (Dotson & Jones, 2011, p. 81). The authors were surprised to find that librarians were “somewhat static in their approach to the role of technology leader, a role for which ideally they should be prepared to fill” (Dotson & Jones, 2011, p. 82). In a promising finding, Dotson and Jones (2011) found that “70% of the respondents reported serving on a Leadership Team or School Improvement Team” and involved in “purposely directing the programs and administration of their schools” (p. 82).

This research project seeks to understand the experiences of teacher-librarian leaders. Dispositions are one way to examine leadership. For at least 20 years, those involved in teacher preparation have been thinking about dispositions. Dispositions, as defined by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) (2020) are “the habits of professional action and moral commitments that underlie an educator’s performance” (Glossary, “D”). Researchers and scholars continue to debate the definition of dispositions, whether to include dispositions in teacher education standards, what instruments are best to determine which dispositions teacher candidates possess, and “research about the impact of teacher dispositions on student learning” (Borko et al., 2007, p. 359).

According to Borko et al. (2007), “dispositions are contingent on knowledge and skills” and those who “lack the skills to carry out particular actions will be unable to do so, regardless of

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their desires” (p. 361). Further, “having the knowledge and skills ... is necessary but not sufficient,” the person “must also have the disposition to do so” (Borko et al. p. 361). Jones and Bush (2009) note that dispositions are sometimes called skills, traits, attitudes, and habits. The Patterns of Thinking project (Perkins & Tishman, 2016) suggests that a “thinking disposition is a tendency toward a particular pattern of intellectual behavior” (para. 3). The project “identified three logically distinct components that are necessary for dispositional behavior: ability, inclination, and sensitivity. Ability concerns the basic capacity to carry out a behavior. Inclination concerns the motivation or impulse to engage in the behavior. Sensitivity concerns likelihood of noticing occasions to engage in the behavior” (Perkins & Tishman, 2016, para. 4).

Research has found that it is important to measure teacher candidate dispositions at multiple points in a program and by different raters, including self-reports, mentor teachers and faculty supervisors (Saltis et al., 2021). Shoffner et al. (2014) found that pre-service English teachers felt that some dispositions were more important than others. Both Saltis et al. (2021) and Shoffner et al. (2014) noted that there were sometimes discrepancies between teacher candidate self-reports of dispositions and the reports of others, specifically mentor teachers. Lopez (2019) found that the dispositions that teacher leaders demonstrated included communication, self-awareness, leading change, self-organization and instruction.

Scholars are working to determine which dispositions are essential for teacher-librarians to demonstrate. Jones and Bush (2009) suggest that if teacher-librarians are tasked with modeling and developing dispositions in students, they must first “have acquired and learned them” (p. 11). Standards such as those from the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) (<https://standards.aasl.org/>) and Canadian School Libraries (CSL) (<https://ilsop.canadianschoollibraries.ca/>) provide a starting point for developing a list of dispositions. Moreillon (2013), in a study to understand how to educate for school library leadership, found that participants “mentioned dispositions such as flexibility, trust, openness, risk-taking and willingness to change as keys to successful instructional partnerships” (p. 62). Research by Long and Jones (2016) found that graduate students selected collaboration, leadership, life long learner, compassion/caring, and flexibility “as the top five dispositions of exemplary librarians” (p. 9-10). In a study of school librarians with at least ten years of experience, Jones and Long (2019) identified three categories of dispositions: thinking dispositions, relational dispositions, and motivational and forward-thinking dispositions related to technology (p. 18). Within these three categories, dispositions such as lifelong learner, flexible, creative thinker, problem-solver, building relationships, and creating motivating PD were identified as important (Jones & Long, 2019, p. 18).

Kimmel et al. (2012) examined 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

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- 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)

Research about the dispositions of educational leaders might also contribute to an understanding of the dispositions of teacher-librarian leaders. Green et al. (2011) suggest that “most educational leadership programs have a formal procedure in place for teaching and assessing leadership dispositions, but definitions, practices, and utility of assessments vary across programs” (p. 4). Wasonga and Murphy (2007) indicated that leadership dispositions include trust and trustworthiness, humility, active listening, resilience, egalitarianism, patience, and collaboration. Helm (2010) determined that the five key dispositions are “integrity, courage, caring, strong work ethic and ability to think critically” (p. 5). Researchers have examined the challenges of assessing dispositions (Lindahl, 2009; Melton et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2020) including their elusive nature, and determining which are essential and which are important but not critical. As we consider the dispositions of teacher librarians and teacher-librarian leaders, there is a need to determine which dispositions are essential to the role and then determine how to assess whether a person has those particular dispositions.

### **Methodology**

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 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.

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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. 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 two overarching questions: First, **How do TL Leaders experience their leadership roles? And second, What dispositions do TL Leaders bring to and demonstrate in their leadership roles?** This paper specifically addresses the second question and presents findings from six in-depth interviews with teacher-librarian leaders (TL Leaders) who are currently working in a variety of formal leadership roles. Findings are organized and presented based on the leadership dispositions identified by Kimmel et al. (2012) in their Dispositional Continua. Each disposition in the continua is presented with representative quotations from the participants' interviews to explore what dispositions these TL leaders bring to and demonstrate in their leadership roles.

### *From Expertise to Advocacy*

Kimmel et al. 's (2012) first disposition, *From Expertise to Advocacy*, was highlighted by several of the participants in this study. Advocacy took many forms, including creating presentations and booklets, as well as daily informal conversations with school leaders to highlight the role of the teacher-librarian and the value a TL brings to the school. Other participants described advocacy as a way of clearing up misunderstandings and misconceptions about the role of teacher-librarians and the importance of school libraries. For example, one participant noted that she carries the “burden of misunderstanding with me as I advocate for TLs in my district role. It is critical that I promote understanding of the TL role and its benefit to students.” Advocacy was seen as a way of creating “greater understanding of the role by others in the district” and school.

### *From Library-based to Community-based*

Just as advocacy was used to clear up misunderstandings about school libraries, participants in this study also talked about how their roles transformed from focusing on the library to focusing on the wider school community. This ties into the second disposition described by Kimmel et al. (2012) *From Library-based to Community-based*. Participants in this study described this as collaboration, coaching, and networking. For example, one participant stated that she works “with teachers to support them to give great learning experiences to kids.” Another participant used her district-level leadership role to “coordinate learning opportunities and events in the district and to keep TLs informed about current practices and thinking around library learning commons.” All of the participants noted the importance of their roles in providing professional

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development opportunities to teachers and networking with others outside of the school or district.

#### *From Affable to Open*

The interpersonal skills identified by Kimmel et al. (2012) as the *From Affable to Open* disposition were also highlighted by participants in this study. For example, the importance of building and maintaining relationships with students, teachers, and administrators was noted as a critical leadership skill: “building relationships with others has helped [me] understand the importance of trust, kindness, compassion, and understanding different perspectives in order to become a good leader.” Similarly, another participant noted that leadership is about “being vulnerable and open and that [it is not limited to] just one person, but is accepting and understanding a variety of ideas. Even the ones you find difficult to accept.” Participants described leadership as a process of earning trust with others by being honest, positive, consistent, passionate, and open.

#### *From Cooperative to Collaborative*

Collaboration and collegiality was a theme that many participants in this study highlighted throughout their interviews. Networking, connecting, collaboration, and partnerships were all terms used to describe a leadership disposition that Kimmel et al. (2012) describe as moving *From Cooperative to Collaborative*. In this study, one participant noted that teacher-librarianship “relies on your ability to connect and collaborate with other folks in the school in order to do cool things.” Another participant described her role as “building trusting relationships, having fun, taking risks, making people feel safe, sharing new ideas, and working with them collaboratively.” Similarly, one of the teacher-librarians in this study emphasized the importance of getting to know every teacher in the school: “you learn what works with some and what works with others. I say let’s figure it out. Working with a huge and diverse group of people is a skill you learn as a teacher-librarian.” Just like building open relationships is a critical leadership skill, so too is coaching teachers and administrators in a collaborative way that ultimately supports teaching and learning.

#### *From Ethical to Modeling Ethics*

Kimmel et al. (2012) describe a fifth disposition as moving *From Ethical to Modeling Ethics*. They note that TL leaders are role models for students in “modeling behaviours you want students to adopt” (p. 115). Participants in this study noted similar leadership skills and highlighted their roles in making the learning and work environment better through their work. As one participant stated, “leadership is making the people around you better because you were there.” Another participant noted that within the school, TL leaders are “trusted to help the people you work with feel happy, safe, productive, and supportive.” Modelling these behaviours with teachers, administrators, and students improves the overall experience for everyone in the school.

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### *From Love of Learning to Professional Growth*

Another disposition of TL leaders as described by Kimmel et al. (2012) has to do with professional growth, which emphasizes inquiry, curiosity, and a growth mindset. In this study, participants described how they model this disposition for their students and colleagues, and how they continually seek to improve their own skills and knowledge. Participants highlighted their own “thirst for learning”, their “creativity in curriculum design”, and their “curiosity” as important personal leadership qualities. As well, one participant elaborated on this by stating that she “learned so much about the TL role and its leadership aspect in my [MEd] studies, and I continue to expand my own understanding by reading, networking, and connecting. I am a hardworking, organized person who is passionate about learning, teacher-librarianship and quality resources. I strive to do whatever I can to improve learning for students and educators.” Ongoing professional development was an important part of being a TL leader for the participants in this study.

### *From Facilitative to Flexible*

The final disposition in the Kimmel et al. (2012) model focuses on how leaders move *From Facilitative to Flexible*. Participants in this study similarly described their leadership role as being an “agent of change” within the school or district and the importance of being flexible, taking risks, and thinking about the future. Flexibility and adaptability were key skills identified by one participant who stated that “a teacher would say to me, ‘that’s crazy, I’m not going to do this’. And I’d [say] ‘yeah, I get that it’s crazy. But why don’t we do it anyway? And if it goes wrong, you can blame me. I’ll be the bad guy. And it’ll be fine. But I think it’s going to work’...And so getting to a space where people will trust you to do those things [is critical] because more often than not, they generally work.” Another participant emphasized the importance of having a high level view of what is going on to help “improve learning for students and educators. I have a picture of the district as a whole, a kind of balcony view. I am able to connect people and connect with people on a larger scale.” Being flexible, solving problems, and being open to new ideas and innovations is a disposition that allows these teacher-librarians to be “informal leaders, even when [they] don’t have official leadership roles.”

Further findings emerged from the study. Several participants spoke about the importance of “street cred”, that is, the value and importance of having experience in the classroom and in the school library as well as an informal leader before moving into a formal leadership role. This “street cred” helped when acting as an instructional partner and coach and building trusting relationships with other teachers. Participants also used the term “passion” when referring to technology, literacy, and working with children and educators. Several participants talked about having the knowledge needed for curriculum support and two mentioned the important work of reconciliation and integrating Indigenous knowledge and worldviews into the curriculum. All of these TL leaders mentioned their passion for their work in schools and school libraries. Four

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participants highlighted how important their Master of Education coursework was for their role as informal and formal leaders.

The findings in this section of the paper address the question: what dispositions do TL Leaders bring to and demonstrate in their leadership roles. Participants in this study described the leadership skills they have developed and these were presented using Kimmel et al. (2012) leadership dispositions as a framework. The following section of this paper will connect these findings with the literature about teacher-librarian and school administrator leadership and present a new model for thinking about teacher-librarian leaders.

## **Discussion**

This study examined the experiences of six teacher-librarians who moved from the classroom and school library into leadership roles in their schools/university and districts using the framework presented by Kimmel et al. (2012) who highlight dispositions of teacher-librarians. Based on the interviews with TL leaders, The Dispositional Continua for teacher-librarians from beginning roles in school libraries to experienced teacher-librarians can be expanded to include teacher-librarians who move into leadership roles.

### **Dispositional Continua for Teacher-Librarian Leaders**

<b>Expertise</b>	➡	<b>Influence</b>
<b>Library-based</b>	➡	<b>Systems-based</b>
<b>Affable</b>	➡	<b>Trustworthy</b>
<b>Cooperative</b>	➡	<b>Coach</b>
<b>Ethical</b>	➡	<b>Inspirational</b>
<b>Love of Learning</b>	➡	<b>Learning Leader</b>
<b>Facilitative</b>	➡	<b>Change Agent</b>
<b>Experience</b>	➡	<b>Leadership</b>

The Kimmel et al. (2012) model includes descriptors used by school librarians that help clarify each continuum. We can add to these descriptors for teacher-librarian leaders.

#### *From Expertise to Influence*

- Plan for advocacy at school, district, regional level and national level



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- Advocate to District Superintendents and other leaders while at the leadership table
  - Model advocacy in the leadership role

*From Library-based to Systems-based*

- Providing professional development for teachers, other teacher-librarians, and other school and district leaders
- Providing leadership in local, regional, national, and international associations
- Coordinating learning opportunities and events in the school and district
- Multi-faceted approach to leadership with emphasis on student learning and change
- Considering processes and relationships for school-wide improvement
- Researching and disseminating information for school-wide improvement

*From Affable to Trustworthy*

- Builds relationships based on trust and reliability
- Beginning at a place of optimism
- Building emotional intelligence
- Sharing passion for work

*From Cooperative to Coach*

- Connecting people to each other
- Motivate, support, assist and guide staff
- Co-mentor

*From Ethical to Inspirational*

- Inspire colleagues to be their best
- Help the people you work with feel happy, safe, and productive

*From Love of Learning to Learning Leader*

- Improving learning for students and educators
- Learning about leadership by researching, reading, connecting, networking
- Learning about yourself
- Creativity in instructional design

*From Facilitative to Change Agent*

- Make teachers and students lives better
- Agent of Change
- Moving school and district initiatives forward
- Passion for changing and moving into an unknown landscape

*From Experience to Leadership*

- Classroom teaching experiences

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- Taking on informal leadership roles
  - Taking on beginning leadership roles
  - Providing professional development for staff, colleagues
  - Presenting at local, regional and national conferences
  - Taking on leadership roles in local, regional and national associations
  - Participating on committees at the school and district level

This research project confirmed that there are some core dispositions that are essential for teacher-librarian leaders. Like Wasonga and Murphy (2007), participants in this study spoke of building trusting relationships and collaborating as important dispositions.

### ***Implications and Conclusions***

According to Wilson et al. (2020), “effective school leaders have a strong and positive impact on the learning of students under their leadership” (p. 18). Therefore, we want to understand the dispositions of effective teacher-librarian leaders. This research used semi-structured interview questions to determine which dispositions teacher-librarian leaders talked about as part of their leadership roles.

Further research needs to be done to look more closely at teacher-librarian dispositions. One way to do this is to create a teacher-librarian disposition assessment similar to one for educators, from East Tennessee State University:

[https://www.etsu.edu/coe/educator-preparation/documents/educator\\_disposition\\_assessment.pdf](https://www.etsu.edu/coe/educator-preparation/documents/educator_disposition_assessment.pdf)

or educational leaders, as in this assessment from Concord University, West Virginia:

[https://www.concord.edu/getattachment/Academics/College-of-Professional-Studies/Department-of-Education/Graduate-Programs-Resources-Forms/EDLDA-Instrument-\(9-16-19\).pdf.aspx?lang=en-US](https://www.concord.edu/getattachment/Academics/College-of-Professional-Studies/Department-of-Education/Graduate-Programs-Resources-Forms/EDLDA-Instrument-(9-16-19).pdf.aspx?lang=en-US).

Included in this new assessment would be dispositions related to the informal and formal leadership roles of teacher librarians. This assessment tool could then be used to confirm the dispositions set out in Kimmel et al. (2012) model and the new dispositions from this research project. Following the guidelines by Wilson et al. (2020), the next step in this research project is to create a valid and reliable assessment tool including testing with pre-service and in-service teacher librarians and TL leaders.

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” (Discussion, para. 8). There is still important work to be done to determine which dispositions are essential to the teacher-librarian and TL leader role and then determine how to assess whether a person has those particular dispositions.

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