Enacting Leadership: Perceptions of Teacher Librarians and the Proposed Model of School Librarian Leadership

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Introduction

The research documents the benefits for both students and teachers when teacher librarians take on leadership roles in their schools. Teacher librarians who take on leadership roles can collaborate with teachers to develop rich learning opportunities for students, provide relevant and engaging instruction, and integrate technology effectively for teaching and learning (e.g., Everhart et al., 2012; Johnston, 2012; Lewis, 2021; Mardis & Everhart, 2014). Although these advantages of teacher librarian leadership have been supported by research, only a limited number of studies have focused on how teacher librarians perceive that they enact leadership in their schools (Branch & Rodgers, 2021).

Research Purpose

This research investigates how teacher librarians perceive they enact leadership in their schools. The purpose of this research is to investigate and test the concepts and propositions of the model of school librarian leadership as presented by Everhart and Johnston in their *Proposed Theory of School Librarian Leadership* (Everhart & Johnston, 2016) in real-world context. As teacher librarian preparation programs strive to continue to evolve with professional standards and expectations, it is important to understand the leadership practices of teacher librarians and the challenges they experience, in order to better prepare them to enact a leadership role in their schools.

Literature Review

A theory's purpose is to make sense of the real world by identifying concepts that describe phenomena and ordering these concepts in a meaningful way by exploring relationships between them (Lynham, 2000). Johnston and Everhart (2016) explored the phenomenon of school librarian leadership and as a result developed a conceptual model of school librarian leadership. School librarian leadership, as defined by Everhart and Johnston, is "the ability to influence and inspire others to meet identified goals or to share an identified vision" (2016, p. 19). Through meta-ethnography analysis a set of five concepts that serve as the foundation of their model of leadership by school librarians emerged (see Figure 1). The concepts of relationships, communication, and growth are positioned within a triangle at the core of the model. Each of these three concepts is placed along a side of the triangle to illustrate how the base concept of confidence supports communication and relationships.

While concepts are the basic units of theory development, theories require an understanding of the relationships among concepts. Propositions are statements expressing logical relationships among concepts (Lynham, 2000). At the core of school librarian leadership are the concepts of confidence, communication, and relationships. Understanding that these concepts are not mutually exclusive and can evolve over time is essential to this model (Everhart & Johnston, 2016).

Essential to the model is recognizing that the many factors and influences affecting school librarian leadership are not mutually exclusive or developed in isolation. The concepts are interrelated, and a school librarian's ability and willingness to enact a leadership role can evolve over time. For example, school librarians can build their confidence and step out of their comfort zones. School dynamics and personnel can also change and therefore either foster growth or build resistance and can influence the degree to which leadership can be enacted (Everhart & Johnston, 2016).
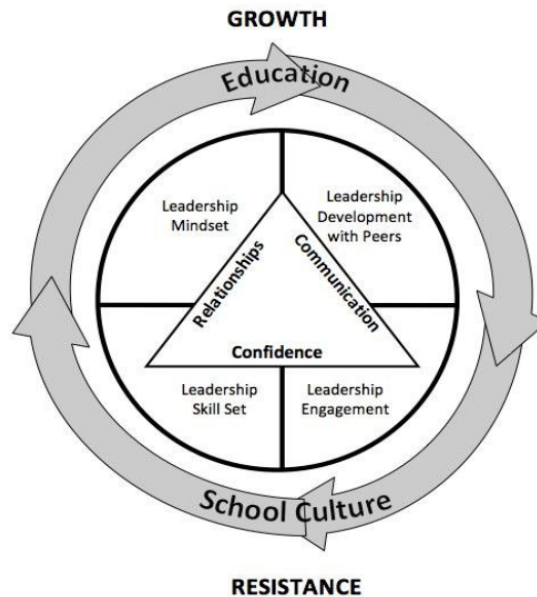
Figure 1. Conceptual model of school librarian leadership.

The five propositions developed in this model describe the relationships among the five concepts listed below:

> Proposition 1: Education can provide a leadership skill set to bolster confidence for the growth of school librarian leadership.
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> Proposition 2: School librarian leadership growth is influenced by school culture.
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> Proposition 3: Peers contribute to school librarian leadership growth.
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> Proposition 4: School librarian leadership growth requires a specific mindset.
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> Proposition 5: School librarian leadership engagement follows traditional leadership patterns and is resistant to forms of leadership that require taking risks.
>
> (Everhart & Johnston 2016, 22–24)

Everhart and Johnston (2016) propose their conceptual model as a starting point and believe that this model and the propositions emerging from it provide an agenda for future research to further develop a theory of school librarian leadership to inform and improve practice.

Methodology

As a part of a leadership course in a teacher librarian preparation program, graduate students were asked in a class assignment to share three ways that they enacted leadership in their

schools. Responses were collected over a three-year period from students from discussion postings on a course Padlet. Participants included graduate students who are already in practice as teacher librarians. Over the three years data was collected from 94 students.

Anonymized responses were downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet. Following Neuendorf's (2017) procedure for content analysis, the researcher utilized an a priori coding scheme of exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories based on the foundational concepts from the conceptual model of school librarian leadership (Everhart & Johnston, 2016). The researcher read and analyzed each response, utilizing human coding to extract individual descriptors of leadership practices and categorize them based on the conceptual model of school librarian leadership. There is a general consensus among scholars that taking explicit steps to increase coder agreement has benefits and adds to the credibility of a study (Creswell, 2017). Therefore, the researcher recruited a doctoral student who has knowledge of this population to code the data in accordance with the conceptual model in order to conduct inter-coder reliability testing.

Preliminary Findings & Implications

The most frequently mentioned concept from the Conceptual Model of School Librarian Leadership was that of relationships, which "as applied to school librarian leadership is the associations and dealings with others both inside and outside the school" (Everhart & Johnston, 2016, p. 20). Participants discussed how they cultivated relationships with a variety of stakeholder groups, including administrators, teachers, students, parents, and other teacher librarians. The importance of developing relationships with other teacher librarians as mentors, critical friends, and co-learners is highlighted in the model.

The second most frequently mentioned concept was communication. The conceptual model explains communication in that effective leaders communicate; "school librarian leaders need to successfully communicate with students, tech coordinators, teachers, and administrators" in order to realize their leadership potential. They need to "share their expertise outside of their school buildings whether it is to be engaged in advocacy or teaching" (Everhart & Johnston, 2016, p. 20). Participants described various ways they communicate, with the majority discussing communicating with school administrators or

teachers. Communicating with the school community was described as hosting events, publishing a newsletter, maintaining the school website, and postings on social media. There were only three mentions of presenting at conferences as means of sharing expertise outside of their schools.

Confidence was noted as an important concept for school librarian leadership in Conceptual Model of School Librarian Leadership and is defined as "a feeling of self-assurance arising from one's appreciation of one's own abilities or qualities" (Everhart & Johnston, 2016, p. 21). As noted in the model, confidence supports communication and relationships, because without the foundation of confidence a school librarian will not even attempt to take on leadership roles and it is unlikely that they will be able to influence and inspire others (Everhart & Johnston 2016, p. 21). Participant responses that spoke to leadership engagement included serving on the school leadership team, district level leadership positions, providing professional development, and taking active roles in professional organizations. As expected, these responses were often tied to the two other concepts of relationships and communication.

Good theory building should result in two kinds of knowledge: practical outcome knowledge, usually in the form of explanative knowledge, and process knowledge, in the form of increased understanding of how something works and what it means (Dubin, 1978). As teacher librarian preparation programs strive to continue to evolve with professional standards and expectations, it is important to understand the leadership practices of teacher librarians and the challenges they experience, in order to better prepare them to enact a leadership role in their schools.

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Biography

Melissa P. Johnston is a Professor in the College of Education at the University of West Georgia. She is a Co-PI on the IMLS Research Grant: Online Ready: Designing Culturally Competent and Impactful K-12 Online Learning, and the Co-Editor of *School Libraries Worldwide*.