
2024 IASL Best Conference Paper: Investigating the Proposed Theory of School Librarian Leadership in Practice

Melissa P. Johnston

Department of Educational Technology & Foundations,
College of Education, University of West Georgia
mjohnsto@westga.edu



Abstract: *This research examines the concepts and propositions of the proposed theory of school librarian leadership as presented by Everhart and Johnston (2016) in their Proposed Theory of School Librarian Leadership through investigating the leadership practices of school librarians in a real-world context. The question that drives this research is: To what extent do the self-perceived leadership practices of school librarians align with the core concepts and propositions of the proposed theory of school librarian leadership? Exploring the leadership practices of school librarians can provide important insights for school librarian educators as they prepare school librarians to enact a leadership role in their schools.*

Keywords: *school librarians, leadership, theory building*

Introduction and Research Purpose

School 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., Childs, 2023; Frilot, 2023; Harper, 2021;

Johnston, 2015; Johnston & Green, 2018; Lewis, 2021; Newsum, 2020; Wright, 2022). Johnston and Everhart (2016) explored the phenomenon of school librarian leadership and as a result developed a conceptual model of school librarian leadership that serves as the basis for their proposed theory. 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).

The purpose of this research is to advance theory by conducting empirical research to test the proposed theory of school librarian leadership in a real-world context. Theory testing research seeks to both corroborate and extend theory by corroborating theoretical relationships, identifying new concepts or theoretical relationships and uncovering potential areas for future theory development (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007).

This research will examine the concepts and propositions of the proposed theory of school librarian leadership as presented by Everhart and Johnston (2016) in their *Proposed Theory of School Librarian Leadership* through investigating the leadership practices of school librarians in a real-world context. The question that drives this research is: To what extent do the self-perceived leadership practices of school librarians align with the core concepts and propositions of the proposed theory of school librarian leadership? Exploring the leadership practices of school librarians can provide important insights for school librarian educators as they prepare school librarians to enact a leadership role in their schools.

Literature Review

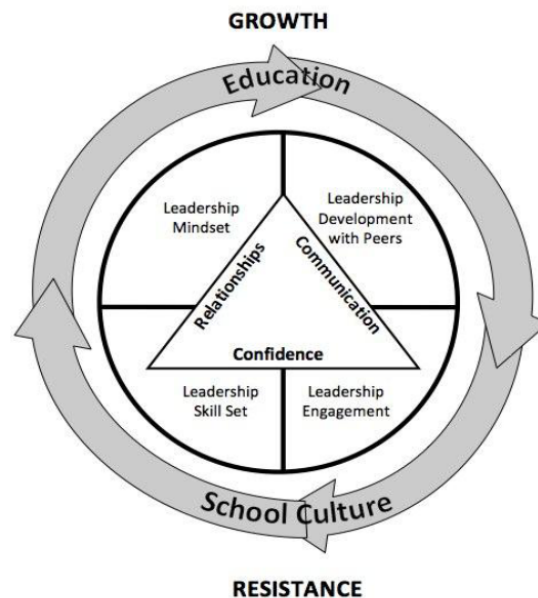
This review of the literature will consist of two sections. First, a review of Everhart and Johnston’s (2016) proposed theory of school librarian leadership and the concepts and propositions. Secondly, a review of the literature from the field that has conducted empirical research to test the concepts and/or propositions from the proposed theory of school librarian leadership (Everhart & Johnston, 2016).

Through their meta-ethnography analysis, Everhart and Johnston (2016) explored the phenomenon of school librarian leadership. In their first phase of theory building Everhart and Johnston (2016) identified the key concepts and the initial explanation of their interdependence through propositions. The development of an informed conceptual model is fundamental to all

theory building research and the conceptual model developed by Everhart and Johnston (2016) represents the concepts that emerged and the relationship between them (Figure 1).

Theory seeks 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, 2002).

Figure 1 *Conceptual Model of School Librarian Leadership (Everhart & Johnston 2016)*



Through Everhart and Johnston’s meta-ethnography analysis, a set of five core concepts emerged: confidence, communication, relationships, growth, and resistance. Each of these concepts has its “own attributes, characteristics, assumptions, limitations, distinct perspectives, and specific function within the conceptual framework that shed more light on the phenomenon” (Jabareen, 2009, p. 53). The concepts of relationships, communication, and confidence are at the core of the model and positioned within the triangle, which is placed on the “axis of growth and resistance” (Everhart & Johnston, 2016, p. 21). Everhart and Johnston state that it is essential to understand that “the many factors and influences that comprise school librarian leadership are not mutually exclusive, there is interrelatedness to each of the concepts, and can they evolve over time” (2016, p. 22). For example, “school librarians can build their confidence, develop more effective communication skills, and step out of their comfort zones. School dynamics and personnel can also change and influence the degree to which leadership can be enacted either via growth or resistance (Everhart & Johnston, 2016, p. 22).

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). Everhart and Johnston's theory building research used the literature as a guideline to decide which relationships were important for investigation. The second and third order interpretations from their meta-ethnography led to the resulting propositions and the conceptual model (Figure 1) visually demonstrates these relationships (Everhart & Johnston, 2016).

Early tests of a theory are typically concentrated on examining the theory's core propositions (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007). The five propositions developed by Everhart and Johnston (2016) that describe the relationships among the five concepts are:

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

Everhart and Johnston (2016) proposed their conceptual model as a starting point and believed that this model and the propositions emerging from it provided an agenda for future research to further develop a theory of school librarian leadership to inform and improve practice. This has indeed come to fruition, as their proposed theory of school librarian leadership has been referenced and/or utilized in more than thirty publications and research studies in the United States and other countries since its development in 2016. Studies were identified through Google Scholar references to the article *A Proposed Theory of School Librarian Leadership: A Meta-Ethnographic Approach*, and through searches in ProQuest and EBSCO databases using the article title and author names. These include peer reviewed journal articles and conference proceedings (e.g., Green et al., 2017; Johnston, 2023; Johnston & Green, 2023; Johnston & Jacobs, 2018; Lewis, 2021; Nurhayati et al., 2022; Soulen, 2020; Wake et al., 2022), dissertation research (e.g., Childs, 2023; ElBasri, 2019; Faqueti, 2019; Frilot, 2023; Fuoco, 2019; Galilea Escobar, 2019; Gill, 2023; Harland, 2020; Kizer, 2017; Kizziar, 2021;

Veatch, 2022; Warden, 2024; Wine, 2020), books (e.g., Biagani & Morris, 2018; Everhart, 2020; Moreillon, 2021), and methods articles (e.g., Kadakure & Twum-Darko, 2024; Xi et al., 2020).

Specifically, there are five studies that collected empirical evidence that tested the concepts and the propositions of the theory. Each of these will be described below in order to look at results related to the proposed theory of school librarian leadership and to assess if the basic premises of the theory hold true in real-life situations.

Galilea Escobar (2019) utilized the proposed theory of school librarian leadership as the theoretical framework for their dissertation research to “characterizes the leadership practices of the person responsible for the school library” (p. 12). The findings from research provided support for the core concepts of confidence, relationships and communication. It was found that professional knowledge led to confidence; trust led to relationships with both students and the community; and these relationships fostered communication (Galilea Escobar, 2019).

The dissertation research by Harland (2020) examined the leadership behaviors of school librarians as they occurred in practice through a multi-case design approach. This research supports the concepts of confidence, communication, and relationships of the proposed theory of school librarian leadership. Findings include that “school librarian leaders intentionally develop strong relationships within the school community, serve as communication conduits in order to improve the school environment, and increase their confidence through mentorship from administrators and support from the school community” (2020, abstract). Harland’s “Portrait of a Leader” (p. 203) operationalized the concepts from Everhart and Johnstons proposed theory and clearly demonstrated the concepts of communication, confidence, relationships through providing practices that illustrate each concept. Harland (2020) asserts that her research extends the proposed theory to include risk-taking, vulnerability, and job crafting. This research was the first effort to examine the theoretical constructs and document with support from practice.

In 2021, Lewis utilized the proposed theory of school librarian leadership as the conceptual framework for her study to “explore how school district leaders can foster the development of an effective school library in which school librarians serve as instructional leaders of multiple literacies” (p. 2). The findings from this research provided support for the core concepts of the theory, especially for the concept of relationships. This study’s findings also support “Proposition 2: School librarian leadership growth is influenced by school culture and Proposition 3: Peers contribute to school librarian leadership growth” (Lewis, 2021, p. 20). Lewis

also suggests adding “clear expectations” as a “foundational concept needed to advance leadership by school librarians” and that the entire model be framed with “how the level of resources available to school librarians and other educators at a school can influence resistance and growth” (p. 21).

Frilot (2023) also utilized the proposed theory of school librarian leadership as a conceptual framework for her dissertation research for “exploring and understanding the lived experiences of library media specialists as leaders” (p. 12). The findings of this study were found to align with the core concept of relationships, in that all participants spoke of developing positive relationships with teachers, administrators, and technology teams as “an integral part of school library media specialists’ leadership” (Frilot, 2023, p. 135). Additionally these findings provide support for the concept of communication since all participants mentioned being able to adapt communications styles as a key aspect of leadership. And finally, “participants agreed that continually learning is a part of the job of a library media specialist;” that “learning with others was beneficial;” and “mentors were also highlighted as very valuable in the continuing education process,” each of these aspects are a part of the concept of “growth” from the proposed theory of school librarian leadership (Frilot, 2023, p. 140).

Most recently, and the most thorough examination of the proposed theory of school librarian leadership is the dissertation research by Childs (2023) that examined if school librarians demonstrate leadership in practice and if there is a correlation between librarian and principal perceptions of librarians as school leaders. Childs (2023) also sought to “know if the concepts and propositions from Everhart and Johnston’s proposed theory of school librarian leadership were evident in the real-world practice of school librarianship” (p. 8). Not only did her research test the concepts and the propositions of the proposed theory of school librarian leadership in real world practice, Childs (2023) also developed a survey research instrument that can be utilized to continue test Everhart and Johnston’s proposed theory of school librarian leadership in a real-world context and help move it toward a working theory.

Child’s survey data demonstrated that school librarians and principals “believe librarians possess the characteristics, skills, and relationships Everhart and Johnston (2016) identified as factors contributing to school librarian leadership growth” (p. 150). Childs (2023) found that school librarians’ “relationships with teachers, other school librarians, and principals impacted school librarian leadership, [which provides evidence that the] core concept of relationships was evident in the real-world practice of school librarianship” (p. 153). In her examination of the two

core concepts of confidence and communication, Childs found that “most librarians and principals agreed that librarians possessed confidence in their expertise and communicated effectively, [concluding that] these concepts were evident in the real-world practice of school librarian leadership” (p. 154).

Childs (2023) also explored the propositions from the proposed theory of school librarian leadership. Survey responses “indicated that education had provided leadership skill sets that contributed to the leadership growth of school librarians... and therefore [provided support that] Everhart and Johnston’s Proposition 1 was evident in real-world practice” (p. 151). In examining Proposition 2: School librarian leadership growth is influenced by school culture, Childs found that school librarians had “experienced school cultures that influenced their leadership growth” which provides support that “Proposition 2 was evident in real-world practice” (p. 152). Survey results also revealed that Proposition 3: Peers contribute to school librarian leadership growth “was evident in real-world practice” (p. 153). In asking school librarians about their “mind-set or desire to lead,” Childs found that Proposition 4: School librarian leadership growth requires a specific mind-set “was evident in real-world practice because most librarians had a leadership mind-set and perceived themselves as school leaders” (p. 154). Finally, Childs (2023) found that Proposition 5: School librarian leadership engagement follows traditional leadership patterns and is resistant to forms of leadership that require risk-taking “was not as evident from the study results as the other propositions from Everhart and Johnston’s proposed theory of school librarian leadership. Only 23% of librarians agreed or strongly agreed they only engaged in traditional leadership roles within the school, and half of the librarians disagreed or strongly disagreed” (p. 156).

In conclusion, the five studies who have collected empirical data from practicing school librarians related to the proposed theory of school librarian leadership all provided evidence that the concepts and propositions of Everhart and Johnston’s proposed theory of school librarian leadership are evident in practice.

Methodology

The purpose of this research is to explore the alignment between the proposed theory of school librarians leadership theory and actual leadership practices of school librarians. Theory testing research requires that the researcher collect empirical data, analyze it to confirm or reject the

concepts and propositions articulated by a theory (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan 2007; Creswell, 2023; Enwereuzo et al., 2019).

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design by utilizing the pattern matching methodology to test the proposed theory of school librarian leadership in a real-world context. Pattern matching is a deductive technique used in theory testing to compare empirically observed patterns from data collected in real world settings with theoretically predicted patterns derived from the propositions of the theory (Pearse, 2019). This method provides a way for investigate theoretical constructs by aligning real-world data with the expected outcomes described in the theory (Creswell, 2023; Sinkovics, 2017; Trochim, 1989; Vargas-Bianchi, 2020).

This research follows the pattern matching process defined by Vargas-Bianchi (2020). The initial step is the definition of the expected theoretical pattern that will be tested (Sinkovics, 2017). For this research, it is the proposed theory of school librarian leadership by Everhart and Johnston (2016). The next step is to translate the theory into measurable concepts and propositions, in this case it is the concepts and propositions as defined in the proposed theory of school librarian leadership. Then finally, the last step is to “collect and analyze empirical data from a relevant source to discover if the data from the studied phenomenon align with the theory” (Vargas-Bianchi, 2020, p. 20).

Participants

This study utilized a purposive sample of school librarians enrolled in a graduate post-masters school librarian preparation program in the United States. These participants were practicing school librarians in the United States. In Year 1 there were 32 participants, 33 in Year 2, 46 in Year 3, and in Year 4 there were 21 participants. Over the four years that this research was conducted, there were 132 participants, 128 females and four males.

Data Collection

As a part of a leadership course in the school librarian preparation program, students were asked in a class assignment to share three ways that they enacted leadership in their schools. Responses were collected over a four-year period from students from discussion postings on a course Padlet.

Data Analysis

In pattern matching research, data is analyzed to determine if the data from the studied phenomenon, in this case school librarian leadership, aligns with the theory (Varagas-Bianchi, 2020). Data analysis was conducted in two phases: thematic analysis and pattern matching.

Anonymized discussion posting responses were downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet and then were imported into NVivo. Using NVivo can enhance rigor in theory testing with qualitative data (Dalkin et al., 2020). A theme “represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 82). In a deductive approach, themes are informed by the theory (Pearse, 2019), in this case, the core concepts of the proposed theory of school librarian leadership: communication, relationships, confidence, growth, and resistance.

The initial coding phase involved creating nodes in NVivo corresponding to the core concepts of the theory: communication, relationships, confidence, growth, and resistance. Then the researcher manually coded the data to further define each code to capture specific aspects of leadership behaviors and contexts. Everhart and Johnston (2016) provide a detailed description of leadership practices that would be indicative of each concept that assisted with this process.

- **Communication:** Instances where school librarians engaged in sharing information, and used formal and informal communication to influence school culture and decision-making were coded under this node.
- **Relationships:** Instances where leadership was enacted through building relationships and interactions with teachers, students, and administrators, focusing on collaboration and building partnerships were code under this node.
- **Confidence:** This node represented any practices that demonstrated confidence in taking on leadership roles or tasks.
- **Growth:** Instances where participants described personal or professional development, as well as leadership evolution, were coded.
- **Resistance:** Situations where resistance to leadership, either internal (personal hesitancy) or external (school culture), or reluctance relating to risk-taking and challenging the status quo were coded here.

After responses were coded, frequency was calculated for each concept to provide quantitative data.

Pattern matching allows for the systematic comparison to determine whether the real-world data conforms to the theoretically expected patterns (Peares, 2019; Varagas-Bianchi, 2020). Pattern matching was conducted using a matrix to compare the empirical patterns from the data (the themes) with the predicted theoretical patterns (the propositions) in order to identify areas of alignment.

Findings & Discussion

The purpose of this research was to determine if the self-perceived leadership practices of school librarians align with the core concepts and propositions of the proposed theory of school librarian leadership (Everhart & Johnston, 2016). Thematic analysis and pattern matching were employed to analyze the data, focusing on the core concepts of communication, relationships, confidence, growth, and resistance, and the five propositions derived from the theory. The results of the thematic analysis and pattern matching show that the self-reported leadership practices of school librarians aligned with several core concepts and propositions of the proposed theory of school librarian leadership (Everhart & Johnston, 2016).

Alignment with Core Concepts

Relationships

The thematic analysis revealed that building and maintaining relationships was a dominant theme across participants' responses (60%) indicating a strong alignment between the leadership practices of school librarians and the concept of relationship. Responses demonstrated that school librarians prioritized building relationships and actively develop professional relationships to establish their leadership roles. Relationship "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 frequently discussed how they cultivated relationships within their schools with teachers and administrators. The development of trustful, collegial relationships with teachers and administration was frequently cited by participants as vital for influencing collaboration and gaining support for their library program. This support for the concept of relationships was also emphasized in the research of Lewis

(2021) and Frilot (2023), and the research by Childs (2023) found that core concept of relationships “was evident in the real-world practice of school librarianship” (p. 153). Participants also spoke of relationships with other school librarians. The importance of developing relationships with other school librarians as mentors and critical friends is also an important component of the relationship concept of the proposed theory and supported by Frilot’s (2023) research. These findings are consistent with the proposed theory’s assertion that strong relationships are foundational to school librarian leadership.

Communication

Communication (36%) was another frequently mentioned theme. According to Everhart and Johnston (2016) 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). The data shows that communication is a central element in school librarians’ leadership practices. Participants described various communication strategies they employed to clearly and consistently advocate for the library program. Participants also spoke about communication that facilitated collaboration with teachers, such as attending grade level meetings, discussing curriculum and instruction, and literacy initiatives. Communicating with the school community was described as hosting events, publishing a newsletter, maintaining the school website, and postings on social media. Harland’s (2020) research and Frilot’s (2023) study also provide support that communication with the school community is a foundational concept of leadership school librarian’s behavior. These practices align closely with the concept of communication in the proposed theory, suggesting that school librarians perceive that effective communication is central to leadership.

Confidence

Confidence in enacting leadership roles varied among participants, suggesting that confidence plays a complex role in the leadership practices of school librarians. Confidence 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). Participant responses (69%) stated leadership activities that reflected confidence included: serving on the school leadership team, district level leadership

positions, providing professional development, attending professional development, writing grants, presenting at conferences, and taking active roles in professional organizations. These school librarians demonstrated confidence in taking on these types of leadership roles and many spoke of their expertise in technology that allowed them to take on leadership roles. Yet, others did not mention these types of activities, suggesting that they did not possess the confidence to engage in these leadership roles. As expected, these responses were often tied to the two other concepts of relationships and communication. This finding suggests that while the concept of confidence is evident, there may be areas where school librarians experience resistance or hesitation in fully embracing leadership roles that extend beyond their area of expertise. This was also confirmed in Galilea Escobar's (2019) research which found that professional knowledge led to confidence; trust led to building relationships; and these relationships fostered communication. These findings align because as noted in the proposed theory, 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). Child's (2023) research also found that the core concepts of communication and confidence were connected and "were evident in the real-world practice of school librarian leadership" (p. 154).

Growth

In regards to the concept of growth, which is defined by Everhart and Johnston (2016) as "leadership development of the school librarian" through informal and formal avenues (p. 20). Participants reported (32%) about their continuous professional growth through learning opportunities, such as attending workshops, pursuing advanced degrees, or engaging in professional organizations. In particular, attending professional development to enhance technological skills was frequently mentioned, illustrating the connection to the concept of confidence. Participants in Frilot's (2023) research stated the importance of professional learning, continuing education, and learning from mentors. While Childs (2023) found that "education had provided leadership skill sets that contributed to the leadership growth of school librarians" (Childs, 2023, p. 151). This commitment to personal and professional development aligns with the growth concept of the proposed theory, which highlights the importance of leadership development.

Resistance

Everhart and Johnston (2016) define the concept of resistance as “anything that hinders the potential or actual leadership of the school librarian. Thus the notion of resistance is associated with noted professional actions and perceptions, such as a leadership task is not my job, perception that change is not needed, lack of risk taking, lack of enactment, and apathy” (p. 20). Since participants were asked for ways they enacted leadership rather than barriers that hindered them from enacting leadership, the concept of resistance emerged as latent finding within participant responses. For example, a few spoke of not being allowed on the leadership team or to attend professional growth opportunities. But it was also apparent responses that did not speak of certain leadership activities. The variation in resistance, whether discussed or there by omission, supports the proposed theory’s acknowledgment that leadership is context-dependent and that barriers to leadership are not uniform across school settings.

Alignment with Propositions

Proposition 1: Education Bolsters Confidence for Leadership Growth

Many participants articulated the value of formal and informal educational opportunities, such as professional development workshops, graduate courses, and self-directed learning, in enhancing their expertise, and therefore their confidence. This pattern also emerged in Frilot’s (2023) research, where she found that participants “agreed that continually learning” is part of the job as a school librarian leader (p. 140). As in Child’s (2023) research, this pattern of leadership supports the proposition that education can bolster confidence for leadership growth and that it is evident in the real-world practices of school librarians.

Proposition 2: School Culture Influences Leadership Growth

The influence of school culture on leadership growth was a recurring pattern, but it should also be noted here that participants were asked for three ways that they enact leadership, and not what they felt fostered their leadership enactment. Therefore, responses were mixed regarding the influence of school culture on leadership growth. Some participants noted that supportive school cultures fostered their leadership enactment, like support from administrators and teachers. While others stated that leadership was limited to traditional roles or they were unable to serve as a leader due to lack of support. In Child’s (2023) survey of principals, she found that “some principals were unaware that their librarians had the desire to lead,” which could indicate

why they did not receive this support. This pattern was confirmed by Childs (2023) and Lewis (2021) who both found that school cultures influenced the leadership growth of school librarians. This finding aligns with the proposition that school culture can play a role in influencing school librarian leadership in practice, indicating that the proposition is supported by real-world leadership practices.

Proposition 3: Peer Influence on Leadership Growth

The role of peers in contributing to leadership growth was evident in several responses. Many school librarians mentioned that relationships with other school librarians, teachers, and administrators that provided support, feedback, and shared learning experiences. Peer support, mentorship, professional learning communities, and networking through professional associations were identified in respondents' leadership activities. This pattern was also evident in the research of Harland (2020) and Frilot (2023) that found school librarians gained confidence and support through mentorship from other school librarians, administrators, and teachers. Childs (2023) found that peer interactions contribute to school librarian leadership growth and that Proposition 3 was evidence in the practices of school librarians. This pattern provides support for the proposition that peers contribute to the growth of school librarian leadership in a real world context.

Proposition 4: Leadership Growth Requires a Specific Mindset

In order to look for the patterns that would support this proposition, responses were examined to look for leadership activities that indicate a proactive growth mindset. These included leadership activities where participants spoke of taking the initiative, going beyond traditional leadership activities of the school librarian, and a commitment to their own professional growth. Many participants spoke of taking the initiative through asking to serve on leadership teams, volunteering to chair school committees, serving as instructional leaders, attending professional development, developing and providing professional development, and forming school library committees. They also spoke of going beyond traditional leadership roles in their schools to serving on district-wide leadership committees, participation in professional organizations, speaking at school board meetings, and presenting at conferences. As stated above, there was strong support for school librarian's investment in their own professional growth, indicating this growth mindset discussed by Everhart and Johnston (2016). This pattern from real-world

leadership practices supports the proposition that a specific mindset is necessary for leadership growth, as does the finding from Childs (2023) that in real-world practice most of the school librarians she surveyed “had a leadership mind-set and perceived themselves as school leaders” (p. 154).

Proposition 5: Resistance to Risk-Taking in Leadership

To determine the patterns that would support this proposition, leadership activities were examined to look for traditional leadership activities versus activities that might require risk taking or innovation. There was clear evidence that school librarians often engage in traditional leadership patterns and but less so to those that might involve risk-taking. In looking for patterns, traditional leadership activities were defined from Child’s (2023) research as “leadership roles within the schools” and leadership that required risk taking was “in the community and/or professional organization” and “district level leadership teams” (p. 163). These included the frequent (65%) reporting of leadership activities such as leading professional development sessions, managing technology, coordinating literacy initiatives, and serving as a member on their school leadership team. Fewer participants (0.11%) reported engaging in leadership activities that required risks, like serving on district wide committees, speaking out to advocate at school board meetings, presenting at conferences, and serving in professional organizations, suggesting a tendency toward traditional leadership patterns. Childs (2023) found that support for this proposition “was not as evident” from the school librarians she surveyed with only “23% of librarians agreed or strongly agreed they only engaged in traditional leadership roles within the school,” but it should be noted this finding was based on the school librarian’s self-perceptions of their leadership roles and self-reporting bias must be considered (p. 156). The findings from the pattern identified in this research align with the proposition that school librarian leadership engagement follows traditional leadership patterns and is resistant to forms of leadership that require taking risks.

The results of this study demonstrate that the self-perceived leadership practices of school librarians align with the core concepts and the propositions of the proposed theory of school librarian leadership. Strong support was found for the core concepts of the proposed theory in the data. The propositions also showed alignment, but school culture and external factors played an important role in shaping the leadership experiences of participants, highlighting the complexity of school librarian leadership in practice. This also suggests that the

theory may need refinement to account for diverse contextual factors that influence the enactment of leadership roles. Overall, the findings provide support for Everhart and Johnston's (2016) proposed theory as a means for understanding school librarian leadership in a real-world context.

Implications & Future Research

By examining the alignment between real-world practices and the proposed theory of school librarian leadership (Everhart & Johnston, 2016), this research offers important insights into the complexities of school librarian leadership, implications for school librarian leadership research, and for the education of school librarians, as well as possibilities for future research to further refine and advance the proposed theory.

In terms of research, these findings provide continued evidence of alignment between the concepts and propositions of the proposed theory of school librarian leadership and the leadership practices in a real-world context. In order to advance theory, it must be tested in a real-world situations (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Løkke & Sørensen, 2014). Yet, further investigations are needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the core concepts and propositions manifest in various school settings.

This analysis revealed that communication and relationships are central to leadership enactment among school librarians, aligning with the proposed theory's emphasis on these two concepts. Future research into the concepts could provide further theoretical development, for example, a more detailed study into the types of communication and how they contribute to leadership, as well as examining the connectiveness between the concepts, such as how communication influences relationship-building and leads to leadership. Additionally, research is need to further examine the different ways the school culture and peers influence leadership growth. The concept of resistance, particularly in relation to risk-taking, also warrants more investigation. These influences could be investigated by examining perceived enablers and barriers to leadership enactment. A more in depth examination of specific leadership behaviors that either support or challenge the propositions of the theory would also be beneficial to advancing the theory. Finally, future studies could investigate how specific educational interventions can impact confidence and leadership growth.

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 school librarian preparation programs strive to prepare school librarians for today's educational environment, it is important to understand the leadership practices of school librarians and the challenges they experience, in order to better prepare graduates to enact a leadership role in their schools. This research highlights the importance of confidence and mindset in school librarian leadership, this development must begin with school librarian preparation programs. School librarian preparation programs need to evaluate how they are teaching leadership and consider focusing on real-world leadership scenarios for school librarians; add coursework that will help students develop a growth mindset and strategies for building self-confidence; teach strategies for resilience dealing with resistance; and provide strategies for the practical application of leadership both within and beyond their school.

Conclusion

It is well documented that the field of library and information science (LIS) is lacking in theory and consistently "borrows" from other fields. This research answers the call to develop theories of our own from the field of LIS (Roy & Mukhopadhyay, 2023) by providing empirical evidence to support in advancing Everhart and Johnston's (2016) proposed theory of leadership. Findings support that the concepts and propositions of the proposed theory of school librarian leadership are evident in the real-world leadership practices of school librarians. However, findings also offer areas where the theory could be refined and where future research is needed. These findings highlight the importance of education in bolstering school librarians' leadership confidence, which must be addressed in school librarian preparation programs as they strive to prepare school librarians to be leaders.

References

- Biagini, M. K., & Morris, R. J. (2018). Growing leaders: Statewide leadership development academies for school librarians. In B. A. Schultz-Jones & D. Oberg (Eds.), *Global action on school library education and training* (pp. 132-149). De Gruyter Saur.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Childs, N. A. (2023). *School librarian leadership: Perceptions and practice* (Publication No. 30575434) [Doctoral dissertation, Converse University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Colquitt, J. A., & Zapata-Phelan, C. P. (2007). Trends in theory building and theory testing: A five-decade study of the academy of management journal. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(6), 1281-1303.
- Creswell, J. W. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). Sage.
- Dalkin, S., Forster, N., Hodgson, P., Lhussier, M., & Carr, S. M. (2020). Using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS; NVivo) to assist in the complex process of realist theory generation, refinement and testing. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 24(1), 123–134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1803528>
- Dubin, R. (1978). *Theory building*. Free Press.
- ElBasri, T. E. (2019). *Four leadership theories in relation to the pre-service preparation of the school librarian for the role of technology leader* (Publication No. 13811676) [Doctoral dissertation, Florida State University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Enwereuzo, I., Antunes, P., & Johnstone, D. (2019). Patterns of testing theory with human subjects: A design science perspective. In the *Proceedings of 25th Americas Conference on Information Systems, AMCIS 2019*. <https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.12616913.v1>
- Everhart, N. (2021). *Evaluating the school library: Analysis, techniques, and research practices* (2nd ed.). Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Everhart, N., & Johnston, M. P. (2016). A proposed theory of school librarian leadership: A meta-ethnographic approach. *School Library Research*, 19. <http://www.ala.org/aasl/slr/vol19>
- Faqueti, M. F. (2019). Leadership in a library: Understandings from the perspective of socioconstructional relational leadership [Doctoral dissertation, Federal University of Santa Catarina]. <https://repositorio.ufsc.br/handle/123456789/215525>

- Frilot, H. (2023). *Leading from the middle: A narrative analysis of award-winning school library media specialists in Georgia*. [Doctoral dissertation, Valdosta State University]. Theses and Dissertation from Valdosta State University Graduate School. <https://hdl.handle.net/10428/6716>
- Fuoco, C. K. (2019). *Moral courage and the school librarian: A Pragmatic approach to professional ethics* (Publication No. 27743025) [Doctoral dissertation, Johnson University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Galilea Escobar, M. (2019). *Oportunidades de influencia desde la biblioteca escolar: Estudio de caso de un liceo técnico profesional de la comuna de Papudo* (Publication No. 28183147) [Doctoral dissertation, Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Gill, D. (2023). *Diversity, equity, and inclusive behaviors of school librarians: Perceptions during times of crisis* (Publication No. 30671538) [Doctoral dissertation, University of North Texas]. <https://doi.org/10.12794/metadc2137662>
- Green, L. S., Jones, S. A., & Panne, A. B. (2017). School librarians fully online: Preparing the twenty-first century professional. *School Library Research*, 20. <https://www.ala.org/aasl/pubs/slr/vol20>
- Harland, P. C. (2020). *An investigation into the leadership behaviors of school librarians: A qualitative study* (Publication No. 27669374) [Doctoral dissertation, Plymouth University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Harper, M. (2021). Other ways of knowing: How school librarians can take a leadership role in addressing multi-literacies across the curriculum in the school library. In the *Proceedings of the IASL 49th Annual International Conference and 24th International Forum on Research in School Librarianship*. <https://doi.org/10.29173/iasl7797>
- Jabareen, Y.(2009). Building a conceptual framework: Philosophy, definitions, and procedures. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(4), 49-62
- Johnston, M. P. (2023). Enacting leadership: Perceptions of teacher librarians and the proposed model of school librarian leadership. In *Proceedings of the IASL 51st Annual International Conference and 26th International Forum on Research in School Librarianship*. <https://doi.org/10.29173/iasl8755>
- Johnston, M. P. (2015). Distributed leadership theory for teacher librarian leadership. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 21(2), 39-57. <https://doi.org/10.29173/slww6893>
- Johnston, M. P., & Green, L. S. (2023). Online ready: Designing culturally competent and impactful k-12 learning. In *Proceedings of the IASL 51st Annual International Conference and 26th International Forum on Research in School Librarianship*. <https://doi.org/10.29173/iasl8755>
- Johnston, M. P., & Jacobs, M. (2018, January). Developing a growth mindset. *School Library Connection*, 2(6), 42-43.

- Kizer, J. (2017). Teacher librarians and technology leadership [Unpublished Graduate Research Paper]. University of Northern Iowa. <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/214>
- Kizziar, E. M. T. (2021). *A descriptive phenomenological study of the roles of the school librarian and school library* (Publication No. 28155368) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Louisiana Monroe]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Kadakure, A., & Twum-Darko, M. (2024). Organisational informal structures: Social identity perspective. *International Journal of Business Ecosystem & Strategy* 6(3), 117–128. <https://doi.org/10.36096/ijbes.v6i3.490>
- Lewis, M. A. (2021). Enabling school librarians to serve as instructional leaders of multiple literacies. *School Library Research*, 24. <https://www.ala.org/aasl/pubs/slr/vol24>
- Løkke, A., & Sørensen, P. D. (2014). Theory testing using case studies. *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 12(1), 66-74. <https://academic-publishing.org/index.php/ejbrm/article/view/1315>
- Lynham, S. A. (2000). Theory building in the human resource development profession. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 11(2), 159-178.
- Moreillon, J. (2021). *Core values in school librarianship: Responding with commitment and courage*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Nurhayati, A., Riyanto, R., & Moh, R. (2022) *Maximize the role of the library as a learning resource in Muhammadiyah junior high school 1 Ponorogo*. *Periodic Library and Information Science*, 18(1), 113-127. <https://doi.org/10.22146/bip.v18i1.3650>
- Newsum, J. M. (2020). Leading from the shadows: School librarian leadership. In C. J. Craig, L. Turchi, & D. M. McDonald (Eds.), *Cross-disciplinary, cross-institutional collaboration in teacher education* (pp. 222-239). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56674-6_12
- Pearse, N. (2019). An illustration of a deductive pattern matching procedure in qualitative leadership research. *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 17(3), 143-154. <https://doi.org/10.34190/JBRM.17.3.004>
- Roy, B. K., & Mukhopadhyay, P. (2023). Theoretical backbone of library and information science: A quest. *LIBER Quarterly*, 33(1), 1-57. <https://doi.org/10.53377/lq.13269>
- Sinkovics, N. (2017). Pattern matching in qualitative analysis. In C. Casell, A. Cunliffe, & G. Grandy (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Business and Management Research Methods* (p. 1056). Sage.
- Soulen, R. R. (2020). School librarian interventions for new-teacher resilience: A CLASS II field study. *School Library Research*, 23. <https://www.ala.org/aasl/pubs/slr/vol23>
- Trochim, W. M. K. (1985). Pattern matching, validity, and conceptualization in program evaluation. *Evaluation Review*, 9(5), 575–604. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841X8500900503>

- Vargas-Bianchi, L. (2020, July 30). *Qualitative theory testing by deductive design and pattern matching analysis*. SocArxiv Papers. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/w4gxe>
- Veatch, C. J. (2022). *Framework of learning for the Colorado highly effective school library Program* (Publication No. 29259747) [Doctoral dissertation, Lamar University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Wake, D., Hu, H., & Shaw, E. (2022). School librarians leading from the center in online learning contexts: Informal communities of practice creating space for connection and collaboration. *School Library Research*, 25. <https://www.ala.org/aasl/pubs/slr/vol25>
- Warden, E. F. (2024). *Comparing perceptions of the roles of school librarians among educators using the future ready school librarian framework* (Publication No. 31145000) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Memphis]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Wine, L. D. (2020). *Impact of school librarians on elementary student achievement* (Publication No. 27957323) [Doctoral dissertation, Old Dominion University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Wright, K. (2022). The evolving roles of school librarians in diverse instructional settings. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Kennesaw State University. https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/instruceddoc_etd/15/
- Xie, J., Ke, Q., Cheng, Y., & Everhart, N. (2020). Meta-synthesis in library & information science research. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 46(5). <https://doi-org/10.1016/j.acalib.2020.102217>



Johnston

Biography

Melissa P. Johnston is a Professor at the University of West Georgia, where she teaches graduate courses in the school library media program. Johnston's research and publications focus on the school librarian's leadership role. She is the 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](#)