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## Talk or Walk: School Principals and Shared Instructional Leadership

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Beginning in March of 2020, public school educators at all levels were thrown into a situation in which they were required to drastically alter pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning. The move from classroom-based instruction to a virtual platform, whether synchronous or not, was too often done on-the-fly and with less than optimal results (Hobbs & Hawkins, 2020; Natanson & Strauss, 2020). With the realization and acceptance, albeit grudgingly, that web-based, internet-based, and/or virtual platforms need to be greatly expanded to the population and may become the norm for public education, there clearly exists a need for an expanded definition of instructional leadership (Harris & Jones, 2020; Harris, 2020).

The situation stemming from the COVID comes on the heels of the release of the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards in 2018. These standards, according to the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (<http://npbea.org/nelp/>), specify expectations for novice leaders who complete high quality educational leadership preparation programs. A particular emphasis in these standards, according to Badgett and Decman (2019), is the responsibility of the school leader to create inclusive cultures and to extend these cultures to address the well-being of both the students and the staff. An essential construct in such a culture is the inclusion of all campus leaders in an effort to increase capacity (Scholastic, 2016). This is particularly relevant to the involvement of the school librarian, as the professional in this role is often overlooked as an instructional leadership resource (Brown, 2014; Hall, 2015).

More recently, principals find themselves in a situation where there are many questions about educational and pedagogical planning, but there are few current answers. COVID-19 and the overwhelming amount of uncertainty that permeates society, much less education, has ushered in a new level of importance for meaningful, goal-oriented educational leadership. More

than ever, the theoretical concepts of distributed and shared leadership are called into practice, as the very definition of “teaching and learning” has become malleable (Elrod & Ramaley, 2020; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).

According to the 2017 State of the States report published by EducationSuperHighway, nearly 100% of schools are connected to the Internet and 94% of classrooms in the United States have Internet access. Despite this access to technology, there is a significant gap between the district and campus level initiatives, implementation, and measurable student outcomes. That is, despite the fact that the infrastructure exists, its use varies widely among campuses and districts. While some of the differences in use are due to a lack of comfort with using technology, there are indications that the vision held by campus administrators could play a key role in the initiatives and their implementation (EducationSuperHighway, 2017). Effective leadership during implementation of technology initiatives is vital (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010), not only to the success of innovation implementation, but also to the sustainability of the innovation (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). A campus vision related to the inclusion of technology in pedagogical and instructional approaches to teaching and learning by administrators and adopted by all stakeholders, including the school librarian, is necessary to support teachers and students throughout innovation adoption and sustainability of innovation, especially in times of uncertainty for public education (Brown, 2014; Hall, 2015; Harris, Mayo, et al, 2013).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of school administrators regarding the role of the professionally trained school librarian in the K-12 environment with respect to campus change processes and activities that relate to collaboration between the librarian and the classroom teacher. To investigate this purpose, the researchers elicited data from specific

questions on the Principal Technology Leadership Assessment Survey (PTLA–Principals Technology Leadership Assessment, 2006) that were overtly related to the purpose of the research.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by four research questions that were posed to school principals as part of the survey:

- To what extent did you promote participation of your school’s stakeholders in the technology planning process of your school or district?
- What do principals perceive as the primary role of the school librarian?
- When considering collaborative activities between teachers and librarians, who should be the primary initiator of collaboration at the teacher/classroom level?
- When considering collaborative activities between teachers and librarians, who should be the primary initiator of collaboration at the school level?

### **Literature Review**

For decades, there has been evidence in the literature regarding administrators’ perspectives and their lack of knowledge and understanding of the professionally trained school librarian’s role within the schools (Church, 2008, 2009; Dorrell & Lawson, 1995; Kaplan, 2006; Naylor & Jenkins, 1988; Lewis, 2019; Pfeiffer & Bennett, 1988; Shannon, 2012; Taylor, 2016). These more traditional perspectives have often led to underutilization, isolation and, in some cases, dissolution of the school librarian position. In a 2015 article, Kachel provides the alarming news that, “From coast to coast, elementary and high school libraries are being neglected, defunded, repurposed, abandoned and closed” (p. 1). The latest revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) has the potential to address these decisions, ensuring a more

beneficial outcome. This is the first piece of federal education legislation in over 50 years to provide revenue for school districts to use federal funds to enhance services and resources that foster effective school library programs. Effective school library programs are those with professionally trained and certified school librarians at their core (Vercelletto, 2015). Despite the ESEA, there may still be evidence that supports Kachel's portrayal of administrator decisions regarding librarians. The apparent disconnect between the legislative intent of ESEA and Katchel's research highlights the immediate need to examine the perspectives of school administrators regarding the professionally trained school librarian's role, value, and contributions to teaching and learning within the school community.

Current empirical studies provide evidence related to the positive impact school librarians have on teaching and learning. Notably, a compendium of research shows schools where professionally trained school librarians serve as campus leaders, students gain more knowledge, earn better grades, and are more successful on standardized tests than their peers in schools without effective school librarian leadership (Scholastic, 2016). In their evolving leadership role, school librarians must address the increasing need for teachers and students to possess knowledge in, and experiences with myriad uses of innovative and emerging technologies, strategies for analyzing and evaluating information resources, strategies that enhance collaboration, not only among teachers, but also among students in and out of the physical school structure (Dotson & Clark, 2015; Stephens, 2011). In the increasingly changing landscape of technology initiatives, innovations, and global perspectives, the demand to stay "cutting edge" grows exponentially, requiring dedicated and highly specialized expertise (Johnston, 2015; Smith, 2010). Because of the expanding notion of the "global village" and the unending proliferation of new technology, teachers and students need guidance and support in navigating

this evolving and ever-changing landscape. Today’s professionally trained school librarians have the knowledge, skills, and expertise to support their campuses in this endeavor (Green, 2011; Smith, 2017).

### **Leadership Role of the School Librarian**

Professionally trained school librarians, as leaders in their profession, “strengthen library media programs by assuming responsibilities of instruction, administration, and professional leadership” and “provide consistent and visionary instructional leadership” (The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards [NPBTS], 2012, p. 31). They are instructional leaders who provide expertise and guidance to teachers and students, forging greater opportunities for teaching and learning. National standards charge school librarians to remain current in use and integration of emerging technologies, learning theories, and instructional strategies. Knowledge of design, development, assessment, resources, and information access enables school librarians to serve as valuable instructional partners. In 2016, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) updated the definition of specialized instructional support personnel to include school librarians, calling for new visions in state, district, and campus leadership roles.

Professionally trained school librarians serving in leadership roles have the greatest potential to positively impact instructional practices and student achievement. They are equipped to mentor teachers and encourage effective practices that support powerful learning environments dedicated to inspiring lifelong learning (Green, 2011). The professionally trained school librarian is proactive and “acts as an innovator, transformation agent, and a technology integration leader” (Smith, 2006, p.16). The leadership of the school librarian is essential in addressing the needs of learners who need to be skilled in multiple literacies and ensuring they are provided with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in our ever-evolving

technological society (Baker, 2016). One of the more interesting concepts is recent literature related to the evolving role of school librarians that puts it bluntly, “...influence comes when you solve someone else’s problem or help them achieve their goals” (Kachel, 2017).

On many campuses, classroom teachers are unaware of how school librarians can support their teaching and technology-integration efforts (Phillips, Lee, & Recker, 2018). This lack of awareness is magnified in settings where administrators lack a collaborative vision inclusive of the school librarian. According to Alexander, Smith, and Carey (2003), the major source of a principal’s knowledge about the abilities of the school library media center is the school librarian. If the school librarian is not engaged in effective advocacy, often the library is ignored or even marginalized. School librarians are often underutilized by their campus administrators, but effective leaders can empower librarians to assume their leadership role. In a study by Kaplan (2006), similar findings were reported characterizing principals’ knowledge of and attitude toward school librarians as one of benign neglect. Kaplan concluded that principals are not aware of the instructional role of the school librarian and the principals do not set high enough expectations for the contribution’s librarians can make to the instructional program of the school. In collaborative relationships, school librarians can support the administrators’ visions to empower teachers to become leaders in innovative instructional strategies that improve teaching and learning (Kaplan, 2006).

### **Perspectives of School Administrators**

The perception of school administrators regarding the impact of professionally trained school librarians on student achievement has fluctuated throughout the years (Shannon, 2016). Elkin (2018) noted, “School librarians may be particularly susceptible to experiencing role ambiguity, conflict, erosion, and overload due to differences in role perceptions among school

librarians, administrators, and teachers that may, in part, originate from the documentary sources that inform school librarians' perceptions of their roles" (p. 87).

The dramatic growth and incorporation of technology into classrooms and curriculum has produced drastic changes in the way school administrators manage school operations (Kelly, 2015). During recent years, the role of school librarians has increasingly evolved to be inclusive of a wide range of responsibilities and skills sets: e.g., evaluation of educational technologies for their use in teaching and learning, lesson development that includes technology that addresses the needs of diverse student populations. It is essential to understand that the school principal has the most influence on the library program because the principal, as the instructional leader of the school, sets the tone and expectations for the pedagogical approaches on the campus (Church, 2009). Because of this, principals often look to librarians and other professionals who can understand and disaggregate test data and standardized test scores. Without these understandings, it is impossible to create meaningful pedagogical approaches that enhance classroom teaching and learning (Weeks, et al., 2016). In some schools, it is common to see school librarians participating in professional learning communities, engaging in lesson planning processes, or providing support in analyzing data across grade levels and core subjects (Lupton, 2016; Weeks et al., 2016; Rinio, 2018).

Most recently, school administrators have incorporated professionally trained school librarians into the school strategic planning teams. The involvement of the school librarian on school strategic planning teams provides an opportunity for the principal, the key decision maker, to perceive the school librarian in a position of importance (Kachel, 2017). According to Church (2009), principals want librarians who are "proactive and collaborative, who exhibit leadership skills, and who interact well with fellow educators" (p. 40). All of this plays into the



perception that the librarian is deeply invested in a school culture of academic improvement. On campuses that have this perception, librarians both contribute to the overall vision for campus programming and utilize their expertise with effective incorporation of technology in classrooms in the professional development of teachers and staff (Best & Cohen, 2013; Perić, et al. ,2019).

### **Campus Vision**

The debate about the role of school administrators as transformational elements has been increasing during the past years (Davis & Leon, 2011; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Miller, 2013; Plichta, 2018; Model. Verrett, 2012; Versland, 2013). Within that discussion, research has continually shown that learning environments promoting strategic partnerships may increase student achievement (Verrett, 2012). In that direction, effective school administrators have become more proactive in incorporating school librarians as key stakeholders within the development of their school vision in order to increase school climate and student achievement (Kelly, 2015; Weeks et al., 2016).

Effective school administrators empower a variety of school stakeholders to assume leadership roles within the organization (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). They engage with teachers, school librarians, and staff, in order to establish trust, experiment with innovative educational programs, empower faculty, and promote research-based instructional practices (McIntrye, 2001; Baker, 2016). More than a decade before, Coleman and LaRocque (1988) highlighted these factors when explaining that school leaders can have a profound effect on the work of other professionals in the district, and ultimately instruction through the creation and maintenance of a positive school philosophy. What is important to understand, according to Beijaard, Geldens and Popeijus (2018), is that the formula for involving professionals in the change process is interactive and multifaceted. That is, there are three dimensions required from

school principals to create an environment in which teachers, school librarians, and other professionals are able to exhibit change agent characteristics: vision building, individual consideration and support, and intellectual stimulation. These dimensions align well with behaviors associated with transformational leadership.

### **Collaborative Relationships**

School leaders who promote the integration of research-based instructional practices within the school dynamic tend to have a positive impact on school climate, culture, and achievement (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Research shows school administrators who promote key stakeholders' participation within professional learning communities and the lesson planning process may have a significant impact on teacher's capacity, school climate, and academic performance (Ramsey, Betz, & Sekaquaptewa, 2013). School librarians may play a critical role within that dynamic by collaborating with teachers on lesson planning and development, pedagogical strategies for technology integration, and coaching on the latest instructional practices (Kelly, 2015; Weeks et al., 2016; Rinio, 2018).

Such an approach is congruent with recent nationwide efforts to increase development and implementation of career and college readiness programs across the schools, in order to primarily increase graduation rates (Best & Cohen, 2013). This tactic is aligned with the fact that school leaders merge project-based learning education with career and college readiness programs. The connection of these two school improvement projects, according to research, have a significant influence on student attitudes towards their future career choices (Tseng, Chang, Lou, & Chen, 2011). Clearly, the advantages of a competent librarian and access to the information, school goals, and best instructional practices significantly enhance educational endeavors that utilize multiple school improvement projects,

Administrators, as transformational leaders, develop a school culture that embraces collaborative partnerships and encourages innovative technologies and strategies for teaching and learning. Their vision focuses on the academic success of students and the well-being of teachers (NPBEA, 2015). Transformational leaders connect and work collaboratively toward higher goals (Burns, 1978; 1998) and are pivotal in establishing leadership and instructional partnerships with the school librarian, providing greater opportunities for learning.

A clear vision and focus with buy-in from staff will ultimately lead to the buy-in and success of all stakeholders involved. Positive school culture is the heart of improvement and growth in any building (Habegger, 2008). School culture includes an atmosphere of mutual respect amongst all stakeholders where teaching and learning are valued; achievements and successes are celebrated, and ongoing collaboration is the norm (Meador, 2017).

Ross (2010) described what leaders can do when implementing new initiatives because the behavior of the principal can affect the school's culture and climate. He stated that leaders can recognize the need to use an inclusive process for planning any change, be intentional in how they talk with people and use staff encounters as opportunities to model desired behaviors, and commit to opportunities for continued discussion once implementation has begun. Next, he examined the too often forgotten veteran teacher. Ross referenced a quote from Van Maaned & Schein (1979), "The support of veteran staff is often overlooked when implementing new programs, and as a result, there is a tendency to emphasize the training of new staff members at the expense of building ownership and support among veteran staff that influence the socialization of new members" (p. 3). He also stated that leaders can talk with teachers about their beliefs about students, their learning and their behavior; walk the halls of the school and conduct informal assessment of the norms and values that currently guide school programs

and interactions with students; recognize the importance of building ownership and support among all elements of the staff (less experienced, more experienced, varied content areas). Lastly, the effects of time constraints were examined. Essentially, teachers have busy days and their plates are often full of teaching, monitoring at duties, possibly coaching, and even tutoring before or after school. Ross concluded, “A significant challenge facing school leaders attempting to integrate a new program into their school’s culture is not only to find ways to decrease task and activity demands that have been unchecked for decades, but to also find innovative ways to address the challenge of insufficient time” (pg. 4).

### Methodology

This study was descriptive and utilized quantitative data. The population for this study included principals and assistant principals listed in the current Texas Education Agency database. The Principal Technology Leadership Assessment Survey was distributed by email; a total of 275 responses were received. While the survey contained open-ended questions, the responses to those questions did not provide meaningful explanation to the data that were collected to address this study’s research questions. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Table 1 provides a description of the 275 survey respondents.

Table 1: Description of Survey Respondents

275 Respondents					
Gender	Male 61%	Female 39%			
Ethnicity	White or Caucasian 66%	Hispanic/ Latino 21%	African American 8.5%	American Indian or Alaskan 1.5%	Did not respond 3%
Age	20 - 29 .49%	30 - 39 13.24%	40 - 49 40.69%	50 - 59 35.78%	60 - older 9.8%

Campus Level	High School 25.37%	Middle School 19.51%	Intermediate School 4.39%	Elementary School 50.73%	
Campus Enrollment	1 - 99 3.41%	100 - 299 17.07%	300 - 749 53.66%	750 - 1499 20.49%	Above 1500 5.37%
Years as a teacher	3 - 5 years 17.07%	6 - 10 years 39.02%	11 - 15 years 27.8%	More than 15 years 16.1%	
Years as an administrator	0 - 2 years 6.34%	3 - 5 years 18.54%	6 - 10 years 28.29%	11 - 15 years 22.93%	More than 15 years 23.9%

### **Instrumentation**

The researchers in this study utilized selected questions and responses that were part of an 81-item survey which assessed the following five areas regarding administrator technology leadership activities: leadership and vision; learning and teaching; productivity and professional practice, support, management, and operations; social, legal, and ethical issues; and role of the professionally trained school librarian. The questions, and their responses, were specifically selected because of the relationship between the questions and professional responsibilities of properly trained school librarians and the focus of this paper. The Principal Technology Leadership Assessment (PTLA), developed and validated by The American Institutes of Research and aligned to the National Education Technology Standards for Administrators (NETS-A) in 2006 was the basis for 59 of the survey items. There were 33 questions related to frequency and evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale (Not at All, Minimally, Somewhat, Significantly, and Fully), 18 questions related to importance and evaluated using a 4-point Likert scale (Not Important, Slightly Important, Somewhat Important, and Very Important), and 8

questions related to perceptions and evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Disagree nor Agree, Agree, and Strongly Agree).

### Analysis

Survey results were entered into IBM's SPSS and descriptive statistical analyses were conducted, along with mean and standard deviation calculations. The survey included items related to frequency and importance. Because of the descriptive nature of this study, researchers focused on frequency and importance.

### Findings and Discussion

Each of the four research questions was answered by a specific survey question. Table 2 summarizes the responses to the first research question: "To what extent did you promote participation of your school's stakeholders in the technology planning process of your school or district?"

Table 2

*To what extent did you promote participation of your school's stakeholders in the technology planning process of your school or district?*

	Frequency	Percent
Not at all	30	10.9
Minimally	50	18.2
Somewhat	85	30.9
Significantly	82	29.8
Fully	28	10.2
Total	275	100.0

Table 2 specifically addresses a vital campus endeavor of acquiring, utilizing and planning with technology in the classroom. Unfortunately, only about 40% of the principals who participated in the study felt the librarian should hold a role in the technology planning process that is either “significant” or “full.” The results are especially significant when one considers the impact of technology on teaching and learning activities in the COVID/post-COVID era. Moreover, this practice directly contradicts literature that school librarians are fully trained in properly vetting and implementing innovative and emerging technologies for use and integration in teaching and learning activities.

Table 3 summarizes the responses to the second research question: “What do principals perceive as the primary role of the school librarian?”

Table 3

*School Librarian Should Be:*

	Advocate for Library Program	Instructional Leader	Instructional Partner	Master Teacher	Leadership Team Member	Checked All
N	182 (66%)	110 (40%)	160 (58%)	78 (28%)	102 (37%)	40 (15%)

*Note.* Only frequency reported since participants were able to check all that applied.

Table 3 results are similar to those in Table 2. School principals tended to diminish the importance of the school librarian in campus-level leadership activities. Only 37% of school principals include the school librarian on leadership teams. Only 40% of the school principals view school librarians as instructional leaders. Instead, a majority of school principals place librarians in provincial roles, such as advocates for their own program and instructional partners with teachers. What is more concerning is that a very low percentage (only 28%) of school

principals do not see school librarians as “master teachers.” This perception suggests why principals do not include librarians in their definition of instructional leaders or leadership team members.

Table 4 addresses responses to the fourth research question: “When considering collaborative activities between teachers and librarians, who should be the primary initiator of collaboration at the teacher/classroom level?”

Table 4

*Primary Initiator of Teacher-Librarian Collaboration at Individual Teacher Level Should Be:*

	N	%
Administrator	37	17.5
School librarian	96	45.3
Teacher	79	37.3
Total	212	100.0

Table 4 extrapolated the provincial mindset of the school librarian and the teacher as a partnership that is created in the administrator’s absence. More than 82% of principals abdicate responsibility of forming teacher-librarian collaborations at the classroom level, instead isolating the responsibility to the librarian and the teacher. That is, when classroom pedagogy needs to be improved, school principals tend to see the responsibility as equally shared between the teacher and the librarian. What is interesting here is that principals tend to place the onus of responsibility equally on the teacher and the librarian. The fact that the principal sees these types of collaborations as outside of the principal’s role is directly in contrast with the literature that places the principal as the primary instructional leader who has a responsibility for everything



that goes on in each classroom. While only 17.5% assumed responsibility for initiating collaboration at the teacher level, 53.8% believed it is the principal's responsibility to initiate teacher-librarian collaboration at the school level. This can be viewed in two ways. First, there is an argument that more principals see themselves at the primary force of change at the school level, over the classroom level. Second, the reported data that only 53.8% consider principals as the responsible party is concerning.

Table 5 describes the responses of the fourth research question: "When considering collaborative activities between teachers and librarians, who should be the primary initiator of collaboration at the school level?"

Table 5

*Primary Initiator of Teacher-Librarian Collaboration at School Level Should Be:*

	N	%
Administrator	114	53.8
School Librarian	84	39.6
Teacher	14	6.6
Total	212	100.0

While principals tend to more readily accept ownership for initiating a librarian-teacher partnership when the collaboration occurs at the school level, only half of the principals (17.5% in Table 4) do so. One might guess that a principal's willingness to initiate at the school level would be directly tied to school-wide initiatives, rather than pedagogical improvement as a result of the teacher assessment and improvement process. Moreover, when considering the school level, principals see the role of the teacher as hugely diminished (only 6.6%). An interesting

sidebar to the results is that about 40% of principals consider the librarian as responsible for teacher-librarian collaboration when it impacts at the school level. This aligns with the 40% of principals in Table 3 who believe that school librarians should be instructional leaders.

### **Discussion and Implications for Future Research**

Results of this study provide insights into both the vision of school administrators about technology leadership and perceptions of the role of the school librarian, as well as potential barriers for effectively utilizing school librarians as leaders within the school. This study provides evidence that practicing school administrators' awareness of the value of utilizing the professionally trained school librarian's skills and expertise in the librarian's role as a campus collaborator and leader have significant need for expansion. This is especially noteworthy to the school administrator who is tasked with the process of distributing leadership among the campus professionals. As administrators develop a leadership vision utilizing innovative technologies and including school librarian collaboration, often the expert in campus-level technology integration, administrators become more comfortable effectively implementing technology campus-level initiatives. Such practices create an environment conducive to effective teaching, improving instructional practices and student performance. Addressing the gaps in school administrators' awareness and knowledge about the school librarian's role in integrating collaborative strategies and technologies could lead to improved technology-rich instruction in the classroom, empowering teachers, engaging students, and facilitating academic growth. To address this need, administrator preparation programs must prepare leaders who possess the knowledge and willingness to make decisions that are instructionally effective, technologically sound, and strategically inclusive of their school librarian as a collaborative partner and instructional leader.

There are several directions that researchers can explore to better understand the “disconnect” between theories in distributive leadership or shared leadership and administrative practice. One area is the investigation into the perceptions that teachers and librarians have on the concept of ownership or accountability for instructional leadership on a campus. These perceptions may be tied to teachers’ and librarians’ perceptions of leadership behavior, and the impact of those perceptions on a staff’s willingness to engage in change efforts, especially with regard to pedagogical change.

Finally, there are four recommendations that are directly tied to this research:

1. Principal preparation programs need to expand perceptions that there are many professionals, especially professionally trained school librarians, who contribute significant value to distributive leadership and the concepts related to shared leadership that positively impact campus culture and school improvement.
2. School librarians have a professional responsibility to self-advocate as instructional leaders, especially on campuses where their value and expertise is under-utilized. This is an important concept because school librarians must first see themselves as school leaders. With this definition, there are basic, foundational, and overt professional obligations.
3. Evidence exists that teacher-librarian collaborations positively impact student performance(Lance & Kachel, 2018; Wine, 2020). Whether classroom-initiated or as part of a school improvement plan, this is a vital component of improving pedagogy and measurable student outcomes.

4. Principals, as the primary instructional leaders in a building, have a professional responsibility to take a higher level of ownership and leadership in promoting the teaching and learning synergy that takes place during teacher-librarian collaborations.

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