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# Finding Balance within School Librarianship: Exploring School Library Leader Behaviors

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## Abstract

*This qualitative exploratory study sought to investigate and uncover how Virginia K–12 school librarians define leadership and discover how they balance their roles and responsibilities of librarianship without the support of a district library supervisor during periods of complex challenges and organizational change. The American Association for School Librarians (AASL) ranks librarian leadership as a common belief central to the librarian profession. This research identifies characteristics of leadership and examines how librarians balance it with the other roles and responsibilities as outlined by AASL Common Beliefs. This study utilized interviews with current school librarians to capture participants' lived experiences with library leadership and complex challenges, revealing a need to revise and expand Everhart and Johnston's school library leadership definition (2016). Additional findings outlined strategies for balancing roles and responsibilities during challenging times without a district library supervisor and core leadership skills to meet challenges. Supplemental findings revealed the need for further research into the complex challenges impacting librarianship. This study demonstrated the adaptive, collaborative, and resilient nature of library leaders who model the power of problem-solving and inspire stakeholders to do the same.*

# Introduction

Leadership is inherent within the school librarian's role (Everhart & Johnston, 2016). According to the Common Beliefs found within the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries (NSLS), "Qualified school librarians lead effective school libraries" (AASL, 2018, p. 11). However, many librarians in the field feel that value and respect for them and their role are lacking (Harris & Alter, 2022). Research suggests that many school community stakeholders still view librarians as stereotypical book pushers and are entirely unaware of the educational value school librarians offer and the positive impact they can have within a school and school district (Burns, 2018; Harland, 2020; Kachel & Lance, 2020; Lewis, 2021). For decades, library advocacy strategies focused on promoting the research related to the impact school librarians have on student achievement, but more recent research suggests that librarians must employ advocacy strategies that target stakeholders in positions of power (Burns, 2018; Ewbank & Kwon, 2015; Kachel & Lance, 2020). Today, more than ever, it is essential for librarians to build their capacity as leaders who can problem-solve, overcome obstacles, support stakeholders, adapt to change, communicate the contributions of the school librarian role, and secure influence through advocacy and professional recognition (Burns, 2023; Kachel & Lance, 2020).

Librarians bring a rich perspective to a school and the school system because they have a unique bird's-eye view of the school community: they can engage with every student, staff member, and potential stakeholder (Burns, 2018). Accordingly, AASL has recognized the value of the school librarian position and expanded the librarian roles to include "leader, instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, and program manager" (AASL, 2018, p.15). However, research before the COVID-19 epidemic of 2020 suggests that many school librarians face numerous challenges and barriers to implementing the roles and responsibilities outlined in the standards, especially in school districts lacking a district library supervisor (Burns, 2020). Lewis's (2021) post-COVID research supports some of Burns's (2020) previous findings: a lack of district library leadership and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of school librarians are potential barriers limiting a librarian's ability to provide instructional leadership.
Several studies exist related to leadership and the roles and responsibilities of leaders in other professions, including academic library professions (Ammons-Stephens et al., 2009; Ashiq et al., 2018; Aslam, 2018; Dirani et al., 2020; Gwyer, 2018; Wong, 2017). While some studies are available on school library leadership (Chow & Conte, 2021; Everhart & Johnston, 2016; Lewis, 2021) and district-level supervision (DiScala et al., 2019; Lewis, 2021; Weeks et al., 2016, 2017), they have limited scope and were typically quantitative. This research study explores how librarians view themselves as leaders and balance roles and responsibilities amidst complex challenges, especially in the absence of district library leadership and supervision.

## Research Questions

This qualitative study aimed to explore how school librarians balance their roles and responsibilities of school librarianship amidst complex challenges without the support of a district library supervisor. Using a theoretical framework built around Adaptive Leadership Theory (ALT) as described by Heifetz et al. (2009) and Everhart and Johnston's (2016)

conceptual framework regarding school librarian leadership, the study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do school librarians define leadership?
2. How do school librarians balance the roles and responsibilities of librarianship during challenging times without the support of a district-level library supervisor?
3. What core leadership skills must school librarians possess to meet challenges?

For theory development to continue, Everhart and Johnston (2016) urged researchers to explore the related concepts and propositions of school librarian leadership in real-world settings. The research questions infused Everhart and Johnston's (2016) conceptual model of school library leadership with adaptive leadership as a framework for investigating how school librarians perceive themselves as leaders and discover how they balance their roles and responsibilities without the support of a district library supervisor during periods of complex challenges and organizational change.

## Literature Review

Everhart's and Johnston's (2016) proposed theory of school librarian leadership served as the conceptual framework for this study. Their study defined school librarian leadership as "the ability to influence and inspire others to meet identified goals or to share an identified vision" (Everhart & Johnston, 2016, p. 2). Everhart and Johnston's (2016) definition of school librarian leadership varies slightly from the AASL definition (2018), which defines school librarian leadership as "the ability of school librarians to influence a school community to foster positive change to move toward an identified vision" (p. 18.). Additionally, Everhart and Johnston (2016) identified five concepts as the foundation of the school librarian leadership model: resistance, growth, relationships, communication, and confidence.

Everhart and Johnston (2016) defined the interrelated concepts of relationships, communication, and confidence as the "core of school librarian leadership," noting how each concept is impacted by librarian's opposition or unwillingness to take risks, change and grow, or their willingness to grow and make positive changes (p. 21). In addition to the five concepts of school librarian leadership, Everhart and Johnston proposed five propositions to describe the relationships among the concepts:

- 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. (Everhart & Johnston, 2016, pp. 22–24)

This study aimed to contribute to this conceptual framework. It included a merged examination of ALT to support the librarians as they evolve and adapt to meet the needs of all stakeholders, address the challenges of librarianship, and fulfill the roles and responsibilities hailed by AASL.

### Theoretical Framework

As today's school librarians continue to encounter roadblocks with implementing the roles and responsibilities outlined by AASL, increased challenges alter how librarians engage with stakeholders and affect how librarians provide resources and services. A vital competency noted in the AASL standards and described within ALT encourages all learners, who are also considered stakeholders, to work together as problem-solvers (AASL, 2018; Heifetz et al., 2009). Rather than expecting leaders to provide answers and complete all the work, adaptive leadership consists of principles and behaviors that compel all stakeholders to confront the issues, engage with the problem, and complete the learning and work required to formulate and implement a response (Nelson & Squires, 2017).

Adaptive leadership is "mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 14). ALT refers to the practice of leadership that mobilizes people to adapt to changing environments (Northouse, 2021). Heifetz et al. (2009) argued that leadership is not about a single individual imposing solutions. Instead, they suggest that complex problems can only be addressed by diagnosing the system, mobilizing the system, recognizing oneself as part of the system, and sharing responsibility across the system. In this context, a system refers to the web of interconnected relationships, behaviors, and ideas that operate within a particular environment. To see oneself as part of the system means acknowledging that a leader's biases, assumptions, and actions are deeply connected to the problem and the potential solution. ALT embraces this complexity as a catalyst for growth, fostering change through active collaboration with stakeholders, innovative thinking, and collective problem-solving (Nelson & Squires, 2017).

Adaptive work involves three complex tasks: figuring out what to conserve from past practices, what to discard from past practices, and inventing new ways that build from the best of the past (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 69). Therefore, adaptive leadership is a practice rather than a position that requires time, dedication, and commitment to the change process (Heifetz et al., 2009). Adaptive leadership as a practice provided additional clarity in considering how librarians engage in leadership work and navigate the roles and responsibilities while responding and adapting to complex challenges without the support of a district library supervisor (Wong & Chan, 2018).

## Methods

Qualitative research is the best methodology for an in-depth exploratory study for which little research exists (Pistrang & Barker, 2012). This qualitative study considered the complexity of the situations and challenges to be studied using an inductive style that focused on "the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem," resulting in the utilization of two worldview paradigms: interpretivism and pragmaticism (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 4). Pragmatism served as the paradigmatic perspective for this study due to current research

suggesting the pragmatic worldview aligns with research related to complex challenges (Ansell & Bartenberger, 2020; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020).

Pragmatism as a paradigm for research is concerned with action and change and with how knowledge begets action. Pragmatists believe that human thoughts are linked to actions, and it is impossible to separate human actions from past experiences or the beliefs that developed from those experiences (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Although qualitative research is often associated with interpretivism, other researchers have conceded that pragmaticism allows for pluralistic positions, and it is feasible to combine interpretivism with pragmatism as one paradigm becomes instrumental for the other (Braa & Vidgen, 1999; Goldkuhl, 2012; Goles & Hirschheim, 2000; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Walsham, 1993).

## Participants and Research Setting

The target population included 21 public school librarians from Virginia school districts who did not have district library supervisors. Data saturation was achieved through purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling. Participants represented eight elementary, five middle, and eight high school librarians across eight Virginia school districts. I first contacted the Virginia Association of School Librarians (VAASL) to identify districts without a dedicated library supervisor. Then, I sent letters to the identified districts explaining the study and requesting permission to contact their librarians directly. Additionally, I secured a site permission letter from VAASL to recruit librarians through their Listserve. This approach allowed me to solicit participants independently of district permissions. Purposive sampling targeted librarians from the school districts that provided explicit permission, while convenience sampling included those who responded to recruitment calls via the Listserve. Snowball sampling then allowed participants to refer other qualified librarians to contact me, broadening the participant pool beyond those identified initially through district permission. Individually, participants met virtually with me using Google Meet, and each semi-structured interview lasted 25 to 60 minutes. The various sampling methods positively impacted the reliability and validity of the study while ensuring participants could provide thick and rich descriptions of their experiences needed to reach data saturation (Etikan et al., 2016; Fusch & Ness, 2015).

## Researcher Positionality

The researcher serves as the "primary instrument for data collection" in qualitative inquiry and must acknowledge bias or subjectivity and explain how education, experience, and background may affect the credibility of data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I currently serve as a high school librarian and as a county library liaison in a Virginia school district without a district library supervisor. A library liaison is a school librarian who serves as the central office point of contact and library representative in school districts without a district library supervisor. The library liaison is often responsible for all library-related professional development, district budgeting tasks, and oversight of the library management system and district library databases, only to name a few. Additionally, I had ongoing firsthand experience navigating complex challenges without a district library supervisor. I recognized the potential bias because of my current experience as a librarian and library liaison, and I tried to minimize how the bias affected data collection and analysis procedures.

I approached the study as open-minded as reasonably possible to explore how school librarians define leadership and balance the roles and responsibilities of librarianship without the support of a district library supervisor. Semi-structured interview questions were designed to minimize bias and prevent leading participants. The semi-structured questions required focus on listening skills, as I aimed to generate thick, rich descriptions from the participants (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I found it challenging to remain empathetically neutral during the interviews. I struggled with showing empathy while maintaining an objective and unbiased stance. Journaling helped me process the personal emotions before rereading the transcripts and recognize any emotion or bias that could potentially influence the analysis and interpretation of the data.

## Data Collection and Analysis

I began the interview process after receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Over a month, as informed consent forms were returned, I scheduled and conducted interviews via Google Meet. I reviewed the consent form at the beginning of each interview to ensure participants understood the procedures and obtained their oral consent before proceeding. Each interview was recorded using a voice recorder and Tactiq, a free online transcription tool from Chrome extensions. Using the voice recorder allowed for a quality check of the Tactiq transcription and alleviated the need to transcribe each interview by hand or pay for a transcription service.

Transcripts were cleaned by reviewing the audio and Tactiq transcription, which was then coded by hand and sent back to participants for accuracy verification. A minimum of five passes through the transcripts produced new codes, patterns, and fresh insight into the relationships of the data sets. Additionally, I scrubbed the transcripts of any potential identifying information and sent them through the AI data analysis program Atlas.ti. This procedure offered an opportunity to test Atlas.ti. It provided a comparative analysis between my manual codes and the AI results, increasing the data sets' validity and reliability—the coding schema produced over 200 codes, leading to the identification of emerging themes for thematic analysis. The word cloud in Figure 1 displays the most common codes related to participants' responses to the interview questions (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Word Cloud of Emerging Codes*


## Findings

The three research questions that were the basis of this study shaped the design of the semi-structured interview questions. The findings generated 19 themes related to the purpose of this qualitative exploratory study: to investigate how Virginia K–12 school librarians define leadership and discover how they balance their roles and responsibilities of librarianship without the support of a district library supervisor during periods of complex challenges and organizational change. Fifteen themes directly related to the three research questions, and four supplemental themes emerged from the data.

### *Research Question One*

Research question one asked: How school librarians define leadership? Participants shared their positive and negative perspectives on leadership. Most recognized themselves as leaders, while others struggled to frame themselves as leaders, noting limited strengths or lack of opportunity caused by school culture and administration. Table 1 lists the themes related to the first research question.

**Table 1**

*Themes for Question 1*

| Theme | Frequency | Percent of participants to whom theme applies |
|---|---|---|
| Advocacy in action: Action-centered leadership | 21 | 100 |
| Leadership as cultivation: Nurturing growth leadership | 21 | 100 |
| Making an impact: Influential leadership | 21 | 100 |
| Empathy in action: Service leadership | 18 | 86 |
| Guiding the future: Vision leadership | 16 | 76 |
| Embracing adversity: Resilient leadership | 11 | 52 |

*Note.* $N = 21$.

The six themes collectively present a panoramic perspective on the multifaceted nature of leadership within librarianship, encompassing growth, service, vision, resilience, influence, and action-centered approaches. These themes parallel Everhart and Johnston's (2016) proposed definitions, concepts, and propositions. The defining concepts within Everhart and Johnston's (2016) conceptual model for school library leadership highlight the interdependence among resistance, growth, relationships, communication, and confidence.

From their perspective, resistance is "anything that hinders potential or actual leadership by a school librarian" (Everhart & Johnston, 2016, p. 18). The concept of growth refers to positive change and development over time. In contrast, relationships concern "associations and dealings with others both inside and outside the school" (Everhart & Johnston, 2016, p. 20). Communication focuses on "sharing information and ideas with others in a variety of formats" (Everhart & Johnston, 2016, p. 20). Confidence is "a feeling of self-assurance arising from one's appreciation of one's abilities" (Everhart & Johnston, 2016, p. 21). It serves as the foundation for effective communication and relationship building.

My findings support the first four of Everhart and Johnston's five propositions regarding the interrelationships among the concepts but diverge from Proposition 5. Across interviews, librarians consistently highlighted the importance of being proactive, taking initiative, and embracing new challenges. L10 explained, "We are so much more than a warehouse of books. I spend much time marketing to families, teachers, administration, and the public." Similarly, L2 shared, "Do you know what librarians do best? We find information, seek support, and seek resources because that is what we are good at doing."

Many participants noted that the most significant obstacles stemmed from school culture and organizational barriers rather than reluctance to take risks, aligning with Church's (2010)

findings. L19 captured this frustration, stating, “Administrators do not understand librarians. I do not know what kind of schooling they receive, but a whole chapter is missing on librarians and what they can do for the school.”

The librarians’ emphasis on resilience in the face of such challenges reflects a willingness to engage in leadership practices that involve calculated risk-taking. The overall tone of the interviews suggested an openness to adaptive and proactive leadership approaches—an important concept implied in the National School Library Standards (AASL, 2018). L20 expressed her commitment to advocacy and initiative: "It is up to me. I have to be proactive. I must advocate for my programs and encourage conversations when challenges arise.” L5 added, “Leading for me is being a continual learner. I must show others I am always learning, share what I have learned, and encourage others to grow.” L15 described the value of experimentation: “The library is enough under the radar that we can try new things and see how new things work. If it goes badly, you share the failure and remember not to do it that way again. Leadership is sharing what works and what does not work.”

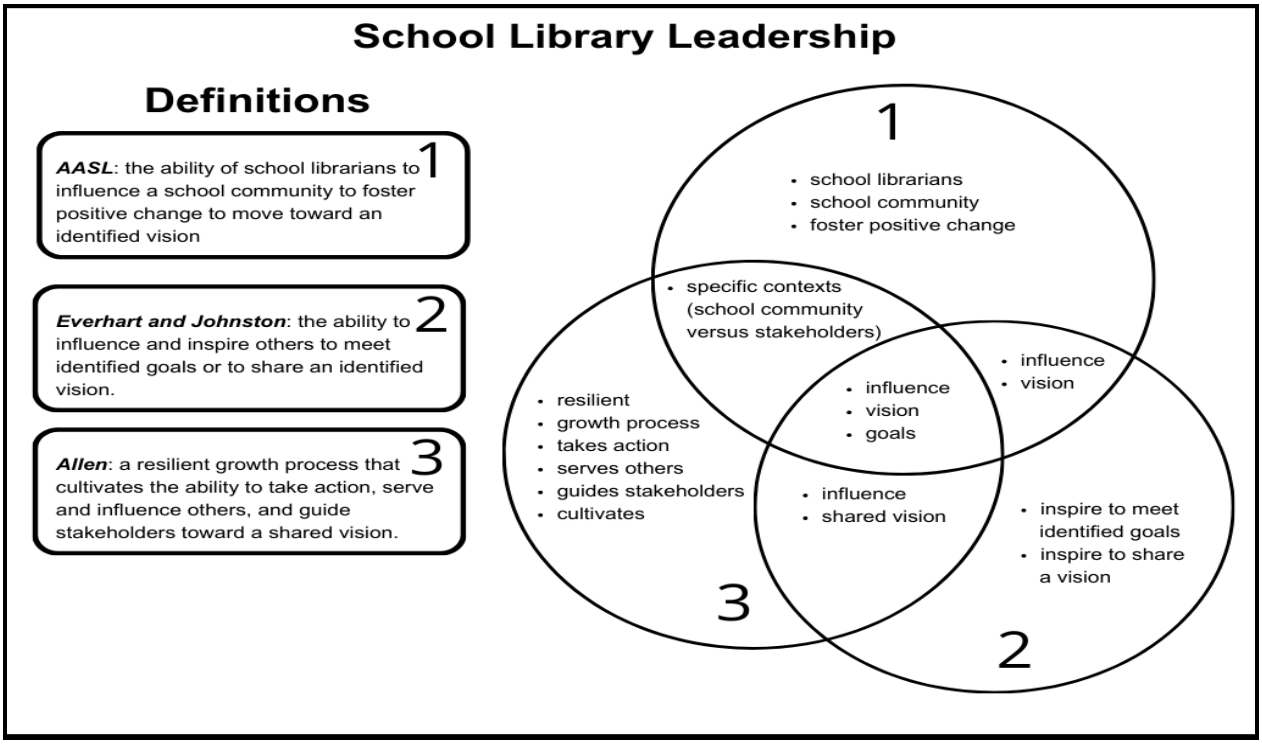
The findings also align with Heifetz et al.’s (2009) adaptive leadership theory and Baker’s (2016) call for librarians to become transformational leaders who recognize the “fluidity of school librarian leadership” (p. 144) and embrace an adaptive mindset that fosters the capacity to be “agents of change” (p. 155). L21 reflected this view: "Being a leader does not mean you are always right. It means you are willing to be wrong and discuss your reasoning with others.” L8 clarified that librarians show leadership through “serving” and the art of “listening and communication.” L11 expressed, “The challenge is listening, communicating, and offering examples for a better path forward. I try to focus on the situation’s positives and say, ‘Here is a good thing that could come out of this if we work together.’”

Furthermore, the results provide insight into how library leaders can respond to administrators’ calls to “take action in response to challenges,” initiate collaboration, and develop teams to meet the school community's needs (Harland et al., 2021, p. 14). L1 explained that her role as a leader “develops a sense of community in our school,” while L18 discussed the power of partnerships as a form of influence: “I know all the content areas and all the standards, and I teach every child in the school. I go to them, and they come to me. People learn I will partner with them to connect the dots and think outside the box. If I say I will do something, I do it. I follow through.”

Overall, the six themes depict librarian leadership as a holistic and multifaceted endeavor, with each theme offering a distinct perspective that, when woven together, conveys the complexity of the role. However, the findings suggest a need to revise and redefine school library leadership as a resilient growth process that cultivates the ability to take action, serve and influence others, and guide stakeholders toward a shared vision. A comparison of the three definitions of school library leadership is presented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*School Library Leadership Venn Diagram*




## *Research Question Two*

Research question two asked: How do school librarians balance the roles and responsibilities of librarianship during challenging times without the support of a district-level library supervisor? Librarians discussed the importance of a district library supervisor who could be available to "offer support, run interference, and provide clear communication". L2 shared that a district library supervisor would have helped her not feel so alone." That sentiment was reiterated by many as they articulated their stories. The experiences and perspectives varied among participants, depending on whether they worked with elementary, middle, or high school students, but several themes emerged consistently from the data. For example, every librarian articulated the power of establishing teams, adopting shared leadership, and building a support network. L17 noted that the librarians in her school district took it upon themselves "to meet regularly and help each other out." Several participants discussed how they would meet in-person monthly and how those meetings "helped us grow as a collaborative unit and as a professional learning community." L9 stated, "We have a strong system where we can rely on each other. We email each other with our needs and have monthly virtual meetings." L7 explained that we do a lot of video chatting and messaging." L3 described working together with other librarians to "create purchasing lists" and "pare down procedures." L17 talked about the impact of COVID-19 and how that challenge catapulted into more challenges. The librarians realized that it was up to them to organize themselves as a team to "make things work." She

asserted, "The librarians get together so we can make the best decisions for all of us." L12 explained how the librarians in her district take “the overwhelming tasks and work as a team to make sure that everything is done.”

All the school librarians emphasized building relationships for professional and emotional support. To that end, librarians vented about the complex challenges librarians faced while relaying the rollercoaster of emotions each one continued to navigate. Those emotions clearly outlined the theme of balancing the emotional response and managing conflicts with coping strategies, but nestled within those responses glimmered optimism and hope, reminding everyone to remember the why. L11 stated, “We love our students and love putting together programs and building our collections for them and our teachers.” L11 continued, “Just do more of what makes you happy and feel fulfilled. It is worth it to work through the challenges. The good is there.” L12 stated, “I constantly focus on creatively engaging our students with our spaces, programming, and new initiatives. L11 stated, “I still have control over what is happening on my floor. I am intentional about scheduling and planning things I enjoy. I control what happens when that class comes in and what activities we do with them, so that helps me regulate. I focus on the parts of the job that bring me joy, the parts that help me remain positive.” L19 added that she like to remind her team that “we all need a little more patience." She emphasized, "More is accomplished when you are responsive rather than reactive.”

Several participants discussed the importance of respect, trust, and the value of perspective, with L4 noting that “despite popular opinion, not all librarians think alike.” L2 stated, “We all have very diverse opinions which helps us bounce ideas off each other. We respect each other's views. We provide input, vent our frustrations, and work together to offer solutions to the problem.” L13 elaborated on the importance of the “Yin and Yang” within her team of librarians, stating, “We balance each other out. We work together so well because we all come from different backgrounds. We all bring different viewpoints. Having that space to talk and problem-solve together is incredibly beneficial.” Table 2 outlines the themes related to the research question.

**Table 2**

*Major Themes in Research Question 2*

| Theme | Frequency | Percent of participants to whom theme applies |
|---|---|---|
| Thriving in teamwork: Build a network of support | 21 | 100 |
| Anchored with a purpose: Remember the why | 21 | 100 |
| Balancing the emotional response: Manage conflict with coping strategies | 21 | 100 |
| Navigating professional identity: Examine roles and responsibilities | 18 | 86 |
| Prioritizing the controllable: Strategic focus on controllable | 14 | 67 |

*Note*. $N = 21$.

The themes for question two closely aligned with Everhart and Johnston's (2016) core concepts for library leadership and captured how librarians manage resistance and foster growth in the face of complex challenges through practical strategies that build confidence, increase communication skills, and foster collaboration. Also, the themes closely aligned with the principles of Heifetz et al. (2009) adaptive leadership, which requires all individuals involved in the change process to see themselves as stakeholders who focus on nurturing relationships, understanding emotions, and utilizing teamwork to generate change and tackle problems (Arthur-Mensah & Zimmerman, 2017). What is more, the themes reflected the interconnected nature of librarianship as outlined in the domains and competencies located in the *NSLS* (AASL, 2018) and echo adaptive leadership principles that call for problem-solvers who can collaborate ethically (Madi Odeh et al., 2021; Uy et al., 2023; Wong & Chan, 2018). L16 described how the librarians in her district utilized their "librarian powers of research and communication to work together for a common cause" despite "political differences, diverse backgrounds, and personal viewpoints."

Exploring how school librarians balance their roles during challenging times without a district-level library supervisor uncovered key insights into their strategies for navigating the complex landscape of their profession. The findings further aligned with adaptive leadership principles stressing the importance of recognizing the political landscape and understanding stakeholders' values and influences. This supports the notion that librarians are part of an extensive system and must understand stakeholders' roles (Hubbart, 2023). Additionally, librarians grappled with ethical considerations such as "fiscal responsibility for spending taxpayer dollars" noted by L21 and professional roles and responsibilities like "privacy, equity, and access" as stated by L2. These considerations align with adaptive leadership principles that emphasize the need for

leaders to work with and learn from various stakeholders and uphold ethical standards demonstrated by behaviors such as a courageous stand on moral principles, transparency in decision-making, and a willingness to collaborate in an environment where all viewpoints are valued (Baird et al., 2023). Furthermore, the professional identity and growth themes aligned with adaptive leadership principles that encourage leaders to stay focused and intentional, continually seek knowledge, and use reflection to guide informed decisions, demonstrating that leaders must have a growth mindset to adapt to changing circumstances (Bagwell, 2020; Dixon & Palmer, 2020). L15 shared an adopted mantra: "The only way out is through." Alternatively, L11 focused on the opportunity each challenge offered to "question current practices and become more diligent as professionals," noting how "easy it is for anyone to get lax in their work." The alignment between the study's findings for research question two further supports the rebranding and redefining of Everhart and Johnston's (2016) definition of school librarian leadership.

## *Research Question Three*

Question three asked: What core leadership skills must school librarians possess to meet challenges? All of the librarians shared personal stories, alluding or explicitly stating the leadership skills librarians need to navigate complex challenges. L19 stated, "Listening is key. Listening leads the direction of my communication and every other decision that I need to make. Sometimes, listening reminds me to wait before I communicate." L6 explained how she was "learning to step away from self to look at the big picture and avoid jumping to conclusions or making assumptions." Focusing on the controllable aspects of roles and responsibilities led to a discussion on adaptability. L4 stated, "I must be adaptable. I have to step back for the common good, make some changes, and adapt to those changes." Table 3 outlines the themes related to the research question.

**Table 3**

*Major Themes in Research Question 3*

| Theme | Frequency | Percent of participants to whom theme applies |
|---|---|---|
| Cultivate communication skills to elevate librarian leadership | 21 | 100 |
| Enhance advocacy skills to elevate librarian leadership | 21 | 100 |
| Develop discernment skills for effective leadership in complex challenges | 21 | 100 |
| Nurture adaptability skills to navigate change | 21 | 100 |

*Note*. $N = 21$

Communication as a skill set aligned with Everhart and Johnston's (2016) conceptual model for leadership and emerged as a fundamental aspect of Heifetz et al. (2009) adaptive leadership. Everhart and Johnston (2016) framed communication as the sharing of information and ideas with others, while adaptive leadership recognizes communication skills as essential in selling the need for change, harnessing the challenges faced, and engaging collective responsibility for adaptation (Heifetz et al., 2009). The findings showed that effective library leadership is closely tied to communication and proves essential for librarians in building relationships, navigating challenges, practicing adaptive leadership, orchestrating change, and engaging stakeholders. L16 explained it as "showing up with receipts," elaborating with, "Here is the data, the research, the best practices. It is annotated for you. I am here decision-maker. We are working together for a common cause." L4 expressed vital points for developing a communication skill set and keeping emotions in check: "Listen to digest. Take time to process and ponder. Offer to return with suggestions. This provides time to get emotions in check. No one wants to listen to an emotional mess." L18 offered, "Just take a deep breath, step back, and focus on the relationship."

Librarians collectively stressed the urgency for improvement in advocacy skills, highlighting how integral a willingness to advocate is essential to their roles and supporting Burns's (2018) research calling for librarians to employ advocacy strategies. Many librarians noted a perceived lack of understanding about their roles and responsibilities and the increased need for advocacy skills to make librarianship more visible and impactful, illustrating that things have not changed since Burns's research reported in 2018 and 2020. L10 added, "At least 30% of my job is marketing the library." Additionally, librarians highlighted the need for increased visibility within the school community, urging colleagues to actively engage with staff, volunteer for school activities, and market their programs. L20 stated, "Go out and make yourself known!"

One notable aspect of the findings was the diverse set of strategies librarians employed to enhance their advocacy skills. The findings revealed problem-solving and resourcefulness as advocacy skills, as librarians can find information to help resolve issues and facilitate conflict resolution. L15 clarified this notion when she declared that librarians are "problem solvers at heart, so when we get a problem, we whittle it down until it is something we can approach." The librarians portrayed themselves as information experts who actively seek solutions and support to resolve challenges, aligning with the roles and responsibilities outlined in the AASL standards (2018). This view of advocacy as both problem-solving and resourcefulness directly supports the administrators' call in Harland et al.'s study (2021) for librarians to take the initiative to help solve problems within the school community.

Additionally, the findings shed light on the school librarians' concerns about the need for more understanding regarding their roles, a concern noted extensively in Lewis's 2021 research confirming role ambiguity. This perceived gap and lack of understanding of roles prompt a collective call for improvement in advocacy skills to showcase the breadth of librarians' services and commitment to all stakeholders and their profession (Harland et al., 2021) and supports Burns's (2023) recent research offering potential pathways librarians could follow to increase advocacy skills, noting that "advocacy is an expectation" and building intentional relationships is paramount (p. 174). L9 concluded that "relationships should be our business because many of the challenges we face come from people not understanding or knowing who we are or what we do."

The themes highlight a sensible skill set essential for effective library leadership. Communication and advocacy skills are foundational for building relationships, addressing challenges, and promoting the librarian's role within the educational environment. Discernment is a multifaceted skill involving analytical tools and emotional intelligence, crucial for making well-founded judgments in complex situations. Adaptability is positioned as a critical strategy for navigating the ever-evolving landscape of school librarianship, requiring courage, flexibility, and a positive mindset. L9 stated, "I am hopeful that people see the steps the librarians in my district have taken to show we are doing what is best for students. We are doing it the best way we can." She went on to say, "I do not fear. I have confidence and pride in how I run my library and communicate with others." The themes point to a practical application of adaptive leadership principles within the context of school librarian leadership, fostering an environment conducive to adaptation and change. The findings show that library leaders who excel in communication, advocacy, discernment, and adaptability are well-positioned to navigate the complexities of adaptive challenges and model resilience and growth, further supporting previous ALT studies and the need to revise the definition of school library leadership (Madi Odeh et al., 2021; Uy et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2022).

## Supplemental Findings

The supplemental findings revealed themes related to the challenges faced by school librarians, offering another perspective on the ever-evolving landscape of the profession. The themes encompassed a range of issues, including the lack of library oversight, the intricate dance between parental rights and educational responsibilities, and the delicate balancing act at the crossroads of intellectual freedom and collection development. These supplementary themes painted a comprehensive picture of school librarians' intricate challenges and offered valuable insights into the evolving nature of their profession and the need for adaptability. Table 4 lists the supplementary themes.

**Table 4**

*Supplemental Findings*

| Theme | Frequency | Percent of participants to whom theme applies |
|---|---|---|
| Advocating for district library supervision in school districts | 21 | 100 |
| Navigating the crossroads of intellectual freedom and collection development | 19 | 90 |
| Evaluating the challenges and opportunities of the library liaison system in school districts | 18 | 86 |
| Balancing parental rights and educational responsibilities | 17 | 81 |

*Note.* $N = 21$

The supplemental findings provided empirical evidence supporting Heifetz et al.'s (2009) ALT and Everhart and Johnston's (2016) propositions showing the relationship between confidence, relationships, communication, growth, and resistance, offering new insights into the dynamics of school librarian leadership and the skills and mindset required for growth and success in this role. For example, the supplemental findings suggested that the challenges and opportunities faced by school librarians contribute to their growth as leaders. L11 found her voice of leadership and passion for the positive by reminding herself to "offer examples for a better path forward and remind those around of the good that can come out of each challenge." By navigating complex issues such as the lack of a district supervisor or facing issues related to intellectual freedom, librarians develop confidence and adaptability, essential leadership skills, and support the notion that education, even by trials and challenges, boosts confidence and produces growth.

Additionally, the supplemental findings suggested that librarian leadership growth requires a specific mindset characterized by adaptability, open communication, and a willingness to embrace change to navigate challenges. L2 captured the librarian role as "wonderful, fluid and complex," asserting that the "librarian's changing roles keep the job from being stagnant or boring." This view supports Everhart and Johnston's (2016) proposition four, stating, "School librarian leadership growth requires a specific mindset" (p. 5). L4 sounded off on librarian leadership, stating, "A leader thinks outside the box. People learn they can come to the library and the librarian will connect all the dots, pull things together, and produce ideas to get things done." Librarians must navigate challenges with resilience and creativity, demonstrating the importance of mindset in leadership development and further supporting Nelson and Squires's (2017) research, acknowledging the need for librarians to consider using adaptive leadership practices in libraries since they face many challenges without clear-cut solutions.

## Limitations of the Study

Data collection was bound to one semi-structured interview per participant due to the limited timeline of one semester. Additional participants were turned away due to time constraints and the large number of participants already lined up for interviews, possibly skewing the results. The heterogeneous grouping was a possible limitation, and the data may have elicited different findings from a more homogenous group, such as all high school librarians from one or more school districts dealing with the same complex challenge.

All the participants in this study were white females from various school districts in Virginia but varied in age and experience. This study did not include document analysis but would have offered additional opportunities for research and the potential for richer findings if district documents such as reconsideration policies and handbooks with guidelines and procedures were included. Furthermore, a qualitative approach limits the generalizability of the findings since the qualitative approach is about exploring or understanding problems and processes that cannot be quantified (Maxwell, 2013).

Additionally, limitations abound because of the subjective nature of a qualitative project and the potential bias of the researcher and the interviewees. I attempted to isolate potential bias by identifying personal relationships with interviewees, inviting feedback through member-checking, and using reflective journaling to circumvent the risk of incorporating personal perspective. Despite the study's limitations, several implications for future research have been identified, including studies that may validate or discredit the findings within this study.

## Implications

The findings of this exploratory study have clear implications for future studies. For example, the proposed revision of the definition of school librarian leadership (a resilient growth process that cultivates the ability to take action, serve and influence others, and guide stakeholders toward a shared vision) aligns with the study's findings, Everhart and Johnston's (2016) conceptual model for library leadership, and Heifetz et al. (2009) ALT. Further research is needed to explore and validate the revision and expansion of school library leadership. Additionally, research is needed to investigate collaboration practices within librarianship, focusing on how collaboration impacts librarians' ability to navigate challenges and foster professional growth. Moreover, exploring how librarians use discernment and communication skills to build relationships and foster collaboration could yield insights into best practices. Additionally, examining the impact of advocacy skills on librarians' visibility within school communities could inform advocacy training and strategies to address misconceptions about their roles.

An important area for exploration lies in investigating the impact of district-level library supervisor support on librarians' professional development, job satisfaction, and effectiveness in fulfilling roles. Research on district-level policy changes and their impact on librarian's roles may prove valuable in exploring the support structures needed to support the evolving needs of school librarians, including the addition of district-level supervisors. Additionally, researchers could delve into the practical challenges faced by school librarians involved in the library liaison system. Exploring how librarians manage their dual roles, the impact on their workload, and the effectiveness of communication within the system could contribute to refining the structure and functionality of the system.

Furthermore, future research endeavors could explore the effectiveness of adaptive leadership practices in addressing challenges within librarianship or the applicability of leadership models such as Everhart and Johnston's (2016) conceptual model or Heifetz et al.'s (2009) ALT across diverse educational settings. Researchers could assess how these models operate in various educational settings and explore the effectiveness of alternative leadership theories within the context of school librarianship. Likewise, given the emphasis on librarians' emotional responses and coping mechanisms, librarians would benefit from future research on developing emotional intelligence among school librarians. Future studies could build on the themes identified within the study, further examine the implications of identified leadership skills, and contribute to a revised definition of school librarian leadership. The potential research avenues aim to enhance the effectiveness of practices, support systems, and leadership strategies in school librarianship, ultimately contributing to the profession's growth and success.

## Conclusion

This qualitative exploratory study investigated how school librarians define leadership and balance their roles and responsibilities without the support of a district library supervisor during periods of complex challenges and organizational change. The study illuminated librarians' perspectives on leadership, leading to a proposed revised definition: school librarian leadership is a resilient growth process that cultivates the ability to take action, serve and influence others, and guide stakeholders toward a shared vision. Key strategies for balancing roles and responsibilities emerged, including building a strong support network, sharing the workload, finding collective solutions, revisiting the "why," communicating the library's mission frequently to stakeholders, developing coping strategies to remain calm and objective, regularly redefining roles to meet the school's evolving needs, and focusing energy strategically on tasks within one's influence. The study also identified core leadership skills essential for navigating challenges: communication, advocacy, discernment, and adaptability. These skills align with adaptive leadership principles, emphasizing the ability to diagnose systems, respond to challenges, and foster resilient library environments, equipping librarians to lead effectively and model professional growth.

Ultimately, the supplemental findings reinforced the need for librarians to harness the skill set outlined in research question three and employ the strategies for balancing roles and responsibilities as outlined in research question two. Collectively, the alignment between the study's findings, Everhart and Johnston's (2016) conceptual model, and Heifetz et al.'s (2009) ALT validate a proposed revision, rebranding, and redefining of school librarian leadership as a resilient growth process that cultivates the ability to take action, serve and influence others, and guide stakeholders toward a shared vision. This newly revised definition further aligns with the principles of adaptive leadership, the NSLS (AASL, 2018), and the recent addition of advocacy as part of the American Library Association (ALA) Core Competences of Librarianship (2023).

The proposed implications for future research aim to build upon the identified themes, contributing to the ongoing development of effective practices, support systems, and leadership strategies in the evolving field of school librarianship. The future research suggestions are intended to suggest ways to enhance the understanding of librarians' experiences and provide valuable lessons for leaders facing complex challenges and organizational changes within educational settings.

This exploratory study builds a foundation for future research endeavors, offering a roadmap to explore and refine the complexities of school librarian leadership. The insights gained contribute to the evolving landscape of school librarian leadership and highlight the importance of adaptive leadership principles in navigating the ever-changing educational terrain. As school librarians continue to adapt, collaborate, and advocate within their profession, the findings exemplify the resilient spirit of 21 school librarians from the state of Virginia who continue to navigate complexities, adapt to change, and strive to create spaces that empower students to become informed, discerning, and open-minded individuals, capable of solving problems collaboratively in a rapidly changing world.

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