



## Online but Not Alone: Teachers' Perceptions of

### Effective Online School Leadership (OSL)

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**Abstract:** Online school leadership (OSL) is of particular interest given the growing number of online education opportunities. As school districts develop more online and blended learning programs, particularly for secondary students, the need to examine leadership in these programs is paramount. The literature suggests that while there are many studies that focus on effective leadership in brick and mortar schools, research that focuses specifically on leadership in online programs is limited. In this study, we aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of leadership in online secondary schools in two districts. Our questions focused on secondary teachers' experiences with leaders in their online schools and their perceptions of what makes for effective leadership practices. Using phenomenology, we interviewed six teachers, analyzed for descriptive codes and clustered these codes into three categories to represent teachers' perceptions of effective OSL: sense of community, organizational learning, and empowerment. Based on these results, we suggest that OSL consists of both foundational and contextualized leadership practices, and that both are necessary for effective OSL. This research has implications for educational leadership broadly, but specifically for leadership in online and virtual schools.

**Keywords:** Online School Leadership (OSL), distance learning, secondary online teaching, phenomenology, community, organizational learning, empowerment



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# Éloigné, mais pas isolé : Perceptions des enseignants en matière de leadership scolaire en ligne efficace

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**Résumé:** Le leadership scolaire en ligne (LSEL) est d'un grand intérêt étant donné la croissance des possibilités d'éducation à distance. Alors que les conseils scolaires développent davantage de programmes d'apprentissage en ligne et mixte, en particulier pour les élèves du secondaire, la nécessité d'examiner le leadership dans ces contextes est primordiale. La littérature suggère que bien qu'il existe de nombreuses études qui se concentrent sur le leadership scolaire efficace dans les écoles traditionnelles, les recherches sur le leadership dans les programmes en ligne sont limitées. Dans cette étude, nous avons voulu explorer les perceptions des enseignants sur le leadership dans les écoles secondaires en ligne de deux conseils scolaires. Nos questions portaient sur les expériences qu'avaient eu les enseignants du secondaire avec les leaders de leurs écoles et sur la façon dont ces expériences contribuent à leur perception de ce qui constitue des pratiques de leadership scolaire efficaces dans les programmes en ligne. En se servant d'une approche phénoménologique, nous avons interviewé six enseignants, analysé les codes descriptifs et regroupé ces codes en trois catégories représentant les perceptions des enseignants sur le LSEL : sens de la communauté, apprentissage organisationnel et autonomisation. Sur la base de ces résultats, nous suggérons que le LSEL se compose à la fois de pratiques fondamentales et de pratiques contextualisées, et que les deux sont nécessaires pour un leadership efficace. Cette recherche a des implications pour le leadership éducatif en général, mais plus particulièrement pour le leadership dans les programmes en ligne et dans les écoles virtuelles.

**Mots clés:** leadership scolaire en ligne (LSEL), apprentissage à distance, enseignement en ligne au secondaire, phénoménologie, communauté, apprentissage organisationnel, autonomisation

## Introduction

Online<sup>1</sup> models of instruction in K-12 education across North America have grown significantly in the past decade (Arnesen et al., 2019; Barbour, 2018a; LaFrance & Beck, 2014; Martin et al., 2020; Morgan, 2015; Richardson et al., 2016). Increasingly, online learning is viewed as a solution to current secondary school challenges, including providing courses for students who require remedial or accelerated programming, and for those who are seeking opportunities to learn at their own pace or in non-traditional classrooms (Cavanaugh & Clark, 2007). The current response to the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the need for school districts to offer online programming for students beyond the educational programs already being offered—both as an alternative to traditional instruction and to “maintain quality instructional continuity during a crisis” (Barbour et al., 2020, p. ii). These changes have illuminated the need for effective school leadership to support teachers in designing and implementing high-quality, online learning programs for students. The purpose of the current study, conducted across two school districts in Western Canada with established online learning programs, is to

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<sup>1</sup> Across North America, online education is also referred to as distance, virtual, distributed or e-learning, depending on the jurisdiction (Barbour, 2018b). For the purposes of this study, the terms *online* and *distributed learning* will be used interchangeably.

examine secondary teachers' perceptions of effective leadership in online learning environments, and to propose a conceptual framework for *Online School Leadership* (OSL).

### Contemporary Conceptualizations of Educational Leadership

In response to global issues, educational reforms, and the ever-changing needs of schools, conceptions of effective educational leadership continue to evolve. Several leadership models from the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have influenced contemporary educational leadership frameworks, including:

1. Transformational leadership (Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978) that prioritizes the values of fostering collaboration, empowering others, and nurturing followers through change (Northouse, 2019);
2. Instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2003) that focuses on the important role of school leaders in improving teaching and learning through their knowledge of curriculum and instruction; and
3. Distributed or shared leadership that challenges prevailing frameworks of individual agency by advocating for leadership practices to be shared among "both positional and informal leaders" (Spillane et al., 2001, p. 24).

Drawing from these conceptualizations of effective leadership, current K-12 educational leadership models continue to prioritize people-oriented leadership skills and

practices, with an emphasis on the concepts of trusting relationships, organizational learning, and collective efficacy.

Leadership practices that focus on developing positive and trusting relationships hold a prominent place in current conceptualizations of school leadership. Murphy and Seashore Louis (2018) claim a key role of leadership is to “create positive environments in which human beings can thrive” (p. 1). Their review of studies on leadership practices that invigorate educational institutions led them to develop a new “positive school leadership” model specifically for school administrators. Within this model, trust is featured as a significant variable—“a ‘glue’ binding members to the organization” (Murphy & Seashore Louis, 2018, p. 13) and connecting all other leadership and organizational elements.

The concept of organizational learning in school leadership has emerged in response to a growing body of research that focuses on the impact of instructional leadership on student achievement. Leithwood et al. (2004) contend that “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn in school” (p. 7). Current conceptions of organizational learning offer broader and more dynamic models of instructional leadership that are grounded in moral purpose, ethical practices, and, most importantly, shared leadership. Such models recognize that school improvement cannot be achieved through the efforts of a single leader (Wagner & Kegan, 2013). Rather, school principals are positioned as “learning

leaders” who invest in continuous professional development for teachers, simultaneously building capacity and trust among staff (Leithwood et al., 2010). Fullan (2013) advocates for school leadership that focuses on investing in developing new competencies, providing resources (time, ideas, expertise), instilling motivation, and unleashing knowledge and commitment among teachers. As Wenner & Campbell (2017) suggest, “teachers are uniquely positioned to promote change within schools because they are well versed in the complexities involved with teaching” (p. 134) and this is certainly true in online learning contexts where the complexities of teaching and learning are unique.

Collective efficacy, another prominent concept in the current literature on school leadership, is understood as the correlation between a team’s confidence and beliefs in their collective abilities and their success in overcoming challenges and achieving common goals (Bandura, 1993). Hattie’s (2016) meta-analyses of studies on the effect size of various school factors provide strong evidence that collective efficacy remains one of the most powerful factors in influencing student achievement. Recent research (Donahoo et al., 2018; Goddard et al., 2015) examines the impact of school leadership on the development of collective efficacy among teachers, suggesting that “leadership may support the degree to which teachers work together to improve instruction” (Goddard et al., 2015, p. 501). Likewise, Donahoo et al. (2018) argue that leaders play a significant role in the development of collective efficacy among teachers.

## Educational Leadership for Online Learning

While much has been written about school leadership in mainstream (brick and mortar) public education, research on leadership practices in K-12 online learning in public education remains somewhat limited. In a case study examining the challenges of virtual school leadership, Richardson et al. (2015) identify the “dearth of empirical research around virtual school leadership” (p.19) as a key challenge and recommend that more research be conducted on the needs of online learning leaders. Alotebi et al. (2018) point out that while studies on virtual leadership have been conducted in business settings and in higher educational contexts, there are fewer studies that address leadership models in K-12 education. “Although virtual learning in secondary education has been implemented for a considerable amount of time, no study examining the influence of models in virtual secondary schools was found” (Alotebi et al., 2018, p. 159). Similarly, in a review of 619 online learning research studies published between 2009 and 2018, Martin et al. (2020) note that most of the studies focused on examining “online learner characteristics and online engagement” while “management and organization factors” were the least studied themes (p. 11). The authors conclude that there is still a need for research on organization level themes, including “leadership of those who manage online learning” (Martin et al., 2020, p. 12).

Michael Barbour, a prominent scholar in online learning, points to a small and growing body of research in the field of online learning that has developed in recent years but cautions that “the practice of K-12 distance and online learning is still outpacing both the availability and use of that research” (Barbour, 2018a, p. 534). The limited number of studies examining virtual school leadership (e.g., Beck & Maranto, 2014; McLeod & Richardson, 2014; Richardson et al., 2015; Richardson et al., 2016) are insufficient in presenting a full picture of leadership practices that are effective in K-12 online learning contexts. As McLeod & Richardson (2014) point out, “we are in clear need of more research that addresses the unique needs of online school leaders” (p. 394). We are also in need of more substantive research that addresses the unique challenges and promising practices of leadership in online K-12 programs.

Online and blended learning programs provide important educational alternatives for secondary students, but their implementation requires “clear organizational planning, strong leadership, and sustained commitment” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2013, p. 24). There are many challenges associated with virtual learning schools; their success is dependent on leaders who can address the complexities of educational policies, technological advancements, and cultural influences (Cavanaugh et al., 2009), and design creative solutions for challenges related to working with staff and students who are geographically disconnected or isolated (Alotebi et al., 2018; Phelps, 2012; Salsberry, 2010). Given the



popularity and substantial increase in online learning opportunities in public K-12 education over the last decade, and during the current COVID-19 pandemic, the need for understanding and enacting strong leadership in online learning has become even more urgent. It might seem obvious that online school leaders should have a minimum level of expertise in technology-based learning in order to manage the operational, pedagogical, and technical requirements of remote teaching and learning, but effective educational leaders must also focus their attention and skills on more *nuanced* (Fullan, 2019), people-focused aspects of leadership.

## Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative interview methodology in which six online, secondary school teachers were individually interviewed to understand their perceptions of effective online school leadership within their school/program contexts. We chose a phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1990) to examine OSL from the perspectives of teachers. As researchers and former leaders and teachers of online learning, we are interested in understanding the phenomenon of leadership by capturing the “essence” (Moustakas, 1994) of online teachers’ lived experiences with the phenomenon of school leadership. We used purposeful sampling to ensure that participants had similar lived experiences of online school leadership by focusing on secondary teachers who work in

established online learning (OL) designated public schools or programs within two urban school districts in western Canada. An email invitation to participate in the study was sent to the superintendents of both school districts in Spring 2020 for their approval and distribution to secondary teachers in the online schools/programs. We received email responses indicating interest from six teachers who then consented to the study. Table 1 provides information about each of the study participants (anonymized with pseudonyms).

**Table 1**

*Study Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Type of Online School</b>	<b>Role(s)</b>	<b>OL Teaching (years)</b>
1	Nick	Online Learning Virtual School (Grades 10–12)	OL Teacher; Department Head	14
2	Emma	Online Learning Program (Grades 9–12)	OL Teacher	20 (teaching); 1 (in OL)
3	Mike	Online Learning Program (Grades 9–12)	OL Teacher	25
4	Hannah	Online Learning Program (Grades 9–12)	OL Teacher	17
5	Isabelle	Online Learning Virtual School (Grades 10–12)	OL Teacher	25
6	Amanda	Online Learning Virtual School (Grades 10-12)	OL Teacher	14

Between October and December 2020, we conducted virtual interviews with all six participants using Zoom® videoconferencing, and recorded the interviews using the Otter® transcription software. During these one-hour, semi-structured interviews, we posed a limited number of questions to allow participants ample space and latitude to describe their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018):

1. As a secondary online teacher, how do you conceptualize effective leadership in your programs? What do you perceive to be the indicators of success for leaders? Why these indicators? In what ways do these indicators illuminate what it means to be successful as a leader? What are some specific practices and behaviours of effective leaders in an online learning environment?
2. Which leadership practices do you identify as being most effective in promoting your professional learning and growth in online programs? Why? What specific impact do these practices have on your professional learning and growth as a teacher? Which leadership practices promote generative conversations between you and your colleague teachers? Why?
3. Which leadership practices do you identify as being most effective in fostering/promoting a shared or distributed leadership model in online learning schools and programs? Why?

The interview recordings were transcribed, and member checks were conducted for accuracy by the participants and researchers.

## Data Analysis

We applied Saldaña's (2016) qualitative methods of two-level coding in analyzing the interview transcripts. In the first level, we independently analyzed words, phrases, and sentence structures (horizontalization) to develop an initial set of descriptive codes for all participants. We compared our codes, identifying those that were most prevalent and salient for each of us, and from this we generated one shared set of codes. Analyzing the frequency of each code within our shared set of codes, including all derivatives (see Table 2), served to confirm that our initial level of coding was valid. In the second level, we clustered these shared codes to develop categories (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004; Moustakas, 1994) which included: 1) sense of community; 2) organizational learning; and 3) empowerment. We subsequently grouped these categories into two main themes of foundational and contextualized leadership practices.

**Table 2***Code Data Frequency*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Derivatives</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Teamwork	Team, team player, sense of team	35
Listening	Listens, listened, listener	33
Trust	Trusts, trusted, trusting, trustworthy	21
Relationships	Relationship	20
Collaboration	Collaborate, collaborated, collaborating	20
Professional learning	Professional development, Pro D	15
Communication	Communicate, communicates, communicated, communicating, communicator	14
Ownership	Own, owns, owned, owning	13

## Results

Key findings regarding effective leadership for distributed/online learning programs were organized into three categories: 1) sense of community, 2) organizational learning, and 3) empowerment. Within each category, we explore several key concepts, ideas, and leadership practices that reflect the study participants' perceptions of effective leadership practices in online learning contexts.

## Sense of Community

Many of the teachers spoke about the sense of isolation that can often develop in secondary online programs with staff working on different schedules and often remotely from different locations. Creating a sense of community and belonging among staff can be challenging, but these aspects of leadership were greatly valued and appreciated by participants. As one participant commented, “I think our principal does a really good job of building community with our group. And I haven't felt that sense of community in a while” (Emma). Participants’ responses reveal key actions that leaders can take to establish a sense of community, including enabling a culture of teamwork, creating positive relationships, and maintaining open communication.

## *A Culture of Teamwork*

Our analysis revealed that the word “team” (and its derivatives) was the most frequent code within our overall data. Participants often referred to their colleagues as their “team.” They value leaders who are “team players,” adding that “the respect they get from their team members is a good indicator of success” (Amanda). Nick, who is the department head for his online program, feels that an important part of his role is to “get our team all pulling in a similar direction.” He commented that “team building is as important in an online space as it is in a face-to-face space” since it contributes to the development of a sense of collective efficacy among staff. The concept of teamwork also

emerged from our data in relation to leadership practices that prioritize shared goal setting and strategic planning for online learning programs. Hannah commented that “nothing goes on our website without it being run past all of us,” including information about the school goal that was co-created by staff.

### *Positive Relationships*

Many of the participants noted the critical role leaders play in fostering positive relationships among staff. As department head, Nick believes that in-person connections are important components of relationship-building for leaders. He shared that “just because we’re teaching online doesn’t mean that we’re devoid of human relationships.” He makes a point of coming into the building five days a week to seek out his colleagues and say good morning to them. Mike remarked that his principal checks in regularly on individual staff members to see how they are doing. Isabelle talked about the importance of administrators “acknowledging how we’re feeling” and being less “rigid to rules” in order to support staff members’ individual life-work challenges. For her, effective leadership is about acknowledging “the humanity and individual situations of people.”

### *Open Communication*

Open communication was another concept that contributed to the development of a sense of community and belonging for the online teachers. Emma spoke of the need for leaders to provide “regular communication” to staff including both virtual and face to face

“because it's easy to lose that sense of humanity when you're working online.” Nick also emphasized the need for school leaders to have “an open door” mindset in the broader sense of being available to staff through multiple communication channels. Hannah and Emily both appreciated that their school principals had found alternate modes and tools of communication to connect with staff, including their principal’s weekly email bulletins:

*She sends out a weekly bulletin ... with some resources, some technical information... that's her way of generating conversation between us, which is really, really important in any teaching situation to get people or teachers talking to each other. But, in an online situation, I think it's even more critical.*  
(Emma)

Hannah and Emily also both spoke about regular virtual team meetings as another form of effective communication that had been implemented by their school leader.

Participants recognized the importance of leaders practicing honest and transparent communication in working through issues. Nick noted that whenever there is an incident or complaint from a parent, his principal responds promptly through direct communication. Emma described her principal as “honest and transparent” in her interactions with staff on tough issues.



## Organizational Learning

Three key ideas emerged that relate to the role of leaders in creating and sustaining a culture of learning within online learning programs: professional learning opportunities; informal opportunities for collaboration; and leaders engaging in their own learning.

### *Professional Learning Opportunities*

While there is an abundance of professional development (Pro D) opportunities for secondary teachers, many of these professional learning opportunities are not designed with online teachers in mind. Hannah spoke about this issue during her interview:

*A lot of really interesting Pro D just doesn't translate into teaching and developing courses and teaching online directly. And there aren't other (online) teachers doing it that you can bounce ideas off. So... I often feel like we're missing out on all kinds of conversations about teaching and learning, all kinds of opportunities for shaping for Pro D that are not just for online learning. (Hannah)*

The participants expressed gratitude for the encouragement they received from their school leaders to engage in formal professional development opportunities that were specific to the online teaching context. Emma was appreciative of her principal's focus on continuous learning, saying "she supports all kinds of professional development all the time." Amanda believes that effective school leaders encourage flexibility and innovative practices within online learning programs by facilitating professional learning

opportunities and being “open to innovation” —a critical component of successful leadership for online learning programs:

*It's providing us with Pro D and up to date information on tools and apps that are going to allow us to innovate. We do a lot of our own course development here...and our leaders often will give us funds to go to at least one Pro D a year where we can learn about new technology and ways to teach online. So...they give us the resources to be able to continue to innovate. (Amanda)*

Hannah appreciated the efforts of school leaders in encouraging staff to engage in professional learning available through school and district in-service opportunities:

*These brief workshops have been very effective I think for classroom teachers because it's led by someone who loves teaching and learning online...We can dialogue with the presenter...it's so helpful to have someone leading the workshop who has wrestled with all the things we wrestle with...because there's a bit of translation that needs to happen. So, an effective leader needs to be able to do that. (Hannah)*

Several participants spoke specifically about the ways in which school leaders shared professional resources through regular staff meetings and email communications. Emma mentioned that her administrator is “always looking to support us with resources that are out there, letting us know about different things that are happening [and] are available.” Mike appreciated his principal’s focus on organizational learning, saying “she’ll often include articles that she’s been reading, or someone has talked about.” Amanda shared that “regular communication with the team, providing resources for the team, and updating information for the team to be innovative” are, in her view, “very

important to being a leader.” Hannah said her school administrator was “an effective online principal” by encouraging the staff and directing them to resources and Pro D opportunities.

Participants also commented on the importance of being able to attend online learning conferences and symposia outside of their school/district that require the financial support of school leaders. Amanda mentioned her involvement in the Google conference, noting “the opportunity to be able to do that year to year and be funded by our leadership team is great.” Nick discussed the importance of school leaders providing extra funding for teams of teachers to attend the annual “Distributed Learning Symposium” to network with other online teachers:

*We look forward to that conference... We get offline. We go to a building, and we get to see all the other people like us that never get off their computers. We go to conferences and build those relationships with other people, so that when we need something, we have had that networking, we can reach out to our network. (Nick)*

#### *Opportunities for Collaboration*

Beyond the Pro D opportunities, participants shared examples of leaders providing informal opportunities for professional collaboration. Amanda recalled her previous vice principal’s “developmental meetings” which emphasized generative dialogue for professional learning:

*We'd actually just go to a coffee shop... and we would often do it outside of school hours because it was fun for us...She bought us all coffee and we would just talk about the things we were developing in our courses, the tools we were using, different sites.....I found it really effective, especially in the early years where we were trying to set ourselves apart as above and beyond other online schools. (Amanda)*

Participants shared experiences of school leaders establishing a culture of professional collaboration in their schools. Hannah expressed that teachers in her school are “excited about what they’re doing and collaborating.” Nick stated that his principal “really encourages sharing information and helping each other out.” Mike believes successful principals are “big on collaborating and bringing ideas and sharing what works and what doesn’t work,” but acknowledged that collaboration is not always easy in online learning contexts:

*So, it's pretty hard for everybody to get together and discuss things...we're not in a regular school where everyone's there from 9:00 to 3:00 and you can meet during lunch, before school after school. It makes it very difficult ...I think that that's probably the biggest thing that I can think of under her leadership—the idea of sharing ideas...and giving us time to collaborate. (Mike)*

Emma shared a story that illustrates the kind of spontaneous collaboration that occurs when a culture of organizational learning and authentic collaboration has been established:

*I've only been here a short time, but whatever she's been doing is working because within two weeks of me being there....one of the people said, "Hey, can we meet up? I want to show you this thing that I do."...This sense of collaboration is pretty amazing...She's created this dynamic where people feel like whatever they have to offer is a value. (Emma)*

When asked about the indicators of success for leaders in online learning contexts, Hannah said it would be that leaders "create the opportunities, the environments, the physical spaces, the online spaces for collaboration between teachers to happen" because teaching online "can be very isolating."

#### *Learning for Leaders*

Many participants talked about the significance of learning for leaders. They admired the efforts school leaders were taking to engage in lifelong professional learning. As Nick pointed out during his interviews, "leadership isn't something we can teach...we can teach book leadership, but until leaders own their own growth, they're not going to grow as leaders." Emma noticed the efforts that her own school principal was making to model how she is growing in her leadership practice: "She's learning and figuring this out."

#### Empowerment

The category of empowerment seemed to represent more of a focus on online leadership practices. Empowerment was represented by the leadership practices of respectful listening, valuing expertise, trust, ownership, and advocacy for online learning.

## *Respectful Listening*

Listening was another salient code that emerged from the data. For Emma, Mike, Amanda, and Hannah, it was important that leaders practice deep listening with all staff members. Emma talked about her principal being supportive of everyone's ideas and listening to all suggestions:

*Even if she's not so sure if the idea is great, she listens. I respect a great deal that, as a leader, she is consistent in letting everyone put their ideas out there. Good leaders don't just listen to the people they think are good. They listen to everybody. (Emma)*

Amanda said that a "willingness to be open and hear everybody's ideas is huge."

Hannah also sees listening as a "huge skill set" for online learning leaders:

*Our current principal spent one year just listening... Attending all the meetings, but just listening. She wasn't trying to solve anything...I think she got a very good handle on the culture of different personalities that she'd be working with...just being present and not trying to micromanage anything. (Hannah)*

Hannah saw listening, not only as a way for leaders to come to know their staff, but also a way of "tapping into and encouraging expertise among the teachers" and providing the opportunity for teachers to share that expertise through "generative conversations." For Hannah, this simple act on the part of the leaders gives voice to teachers on staff: "We feel listened to and are listened to." Similarly, Isabelle shared that the most important

quality for online leaders is that they “truly listen,” not “tunneling their own vision,” but “actually listening to what the person is saying.”

### *Valuing Expertise*

Many of the participants spoke of how their school leaders valued the skills, knowledge, and expertise of the staff. Nick shared that his principal “looks out for new talent within each of us and sees what we have to offer.” When Emma told her school principal that she was going to present at an upcoming conference, she expected that the principal might think the conference would take away from Emma’s other responsibilities. On the contrary, the principal responded with enthusiasm and excitement, which Emma found both “refreshing and supportive.” When asked about the indicators of success for effective leaders, Emma’s said:

*...people who feel they’re appreciated, people who feel like they’re recognized as an expert or, at least, seen as extremely capable...So what I see is that everyone feels very confident that what they’re doing is of value, something to offer.*  
(Emma)

### *Trust*

All participants talked about trust as a key element in effective leadership for online learning. Isabelle spoke of her frustration at not being permitted to work remotely during the pandemic. She perceived this decision as a lack of trust on the part of administration. Isabelle believes good leadership is “somebody who trusts... that we’re professionals.”

Similarly, Nick shared his thoughts on trust from the perspective of his dual roles as both department head and teacher on staff, noting that he thinks “micromanagement is the death of online leadership.” He believes good leaders trust that the people on their team are doing what they should. Amanda spoke of trust throughout her interview, sharing that all leaders should “give up control a little bit and trust. Trust that your teachers are doing the right things and have the right ideas.” With respect to leaders who are new to a school, in Amanda’s view, it takes teachers “a bit of time to trust them and feel safe.”

### *Ownership*

Participants alluded to a sense of ownership within their online school spaces. Nick spoke about ownership in relation to the culture of collaboration and positive working relationships that had been established in their programs: “...we all work together. And that wasn’t coming from the boss... that was coming from within the team.” Hannah and Amanda also spoke about the importance of shared ownership with Hannah noting that staff have input into decisions and planning for the future, including course development. For Amanda, there was an important connection between ownership and innovation. She shared with pride that her online learning colleagues had been given “a lot of free reign to innovate and create,” which set their school apart from mainstream schools and other online programs:



*I think if you're too tight on that control then you can't innovate because you're not open to other people's ideas...And in the online world you have to innovate, or you're left behind...it's changing every day so if you're not open to that, then you get left in the dust. So, our leaders having that confidence in us to be able to do that is great. (Amanda)*

Emma also expressed how much she appreciated her school principals being “open to ideas” of the staff and giving them space to “solve things, figure out how we could do better.” Emma believes that effective leaders are those who “empower” others to take on leadership responsibilities and see themselves as “facilitators” rather than lone leaders, noting that this mindset shift is a process for some leaders. “This kind of shared leadership comes with a great deal of confidence...someone who knows who they are and knows who they aren't and is totally okay with that.”

#### *Advocacy*

All of the participants expressed great pride in their online learning programs, but many said that they often felt like they were misunderstood or unappreciated by other teachers and leaders in the school district. Budget cuts, staffing cuts, loss of dedicated building spaces for their programs, and perceptions that the online learning program was sometimes used as a “dumping ground” for hard-to-place teachers had left Hannah, Amanda, Mike and other participants feeling frustrated and marginalized. Hannah shared that “for years we've suffered with cuts, made by leadership above.” Amanda was also frustrated:

*Our biggest challenge is actually from the district...For instance, they took a large portion of our building away to another program. Well, we do have students in our building three days a week. And we do have a large staff that need office space. And so, they just keep taking away our space because they don't see the value in what we do. And that's frustrating, because we're constantly having to battle for everything. (Amanda)*

But it was the perceived lack of understanding from her colleagues in mainstream schools that concerned Amanda the most:

*I find that teachers in regular bricks and mortar schools don't actually respect us as full teachers. They often shove aside our ideas.... So, I think my greatest hope is...that they would respect me as a teacher, and that they would be open to ideas and new ways of doing things. (Amanda)*

These teachers believe that a critical role for their school leaders is raising the profile of online learning as a valuable and effective program alternative for students. As Mike commented, "you need a principal or administrator who is going to be there to support the team...and you know that they have your back." Hannah talked about the importance of having school and district administrators who advocate for online learning programs:

*Over the 17 years that I have been involved, that has been the most frustrating thing to encounter as a teacher...when at the top levels of how decisions are being made in a district... it's not even on their radar that online learning needs to be an effective, viable, credible alternative way of students learning and teachers teaching. So that's really helpful to have, as high up as the superintendent, believers, if you will, in the value of online teaching and learning. (Hannah)*

## Discussion

Our study suggests that two foundational practices of effective online school leadership (OSL) may be categorized as: 1) developing a sense of community among staff, and 2) enabling organizational learning. These practices reflect current educational leadership theories summarized in our review of the literature—leadership models that encompass people-oriented skills, and actions that prioritize trusting relationships, ongoing professional learning, and collective efficacy. These foundational practices reflect aspects of transformational leadership practices that are desirable in all schools, notably the concept that effective leaders create connections, nurture relationships, stay attentive to people’s needs and values, and provide clear, honest, and transparent communication. These elements of strong leadership are arguably even more significant in secondary online learning contexts given the feelings of isolation and marginalization shared by our study participants.

Beyond these foundational leadership practices, our study suggests that OSL requires contextualized leadership practices to respond to the unique contexts and challenges of online schooling. The category of empowerment emerged as a surprising key component of effective OSL, incorporating specific and intentional school leadership practices related to listening, valuing expertise, trust, ownership, and advocacy for online programming.

We have organized our discussion into two sections that focus on the themes of foundational leadership practices and contextualized leadership practices that are particularly relevant to the online environment.

#### Foundational Leadership Practices

Our study suggests that the two foundational practices of effective online school leadership (OSL) are developing a sense of community among staff and enabling organizational learning. These practices reflect aspects of transformational leadership, notably the concept that effective leaders must be “social architects” (Northouse, 2019, p. 178) who create connections, nurture relationships, stay attentive to people’s needs and values, and provide clear, honest and transparent communication. These elements of strong leadership are arguably even more significant in secondary online learning contexts given the feelings of isolation and marginalization shared by our study participants. Many of the teachers expressed their appreciation for the efforts of their school leaders in building positive relationships with and among staff, and communicating openly and honestly with teachers—creating what Emma referred to as a “sense of humanity when you’re working online.” Perhaps the most significant concept related to building a sense of community in our study was the notion of teamwork and the efforts of online school leaders in finding creative ways for teachers to collaborate with their peers and deepen their motivation for continuous learning. Feeling like they are part of a team, even in the

isolating conditions of remote teaching, is clearly an aspect of their professional lives that our study participants value. This speaks to the significant need for online learning teachers to experience what Peter Senge (1990) referred to as “metanoia” – a spiritual transformation to becoming “part of something larger than themselves, of being connected, of being generative” (p. 13).

Organizational learning was another key category in teachers’ perceptions of effective OSL. This is consistent with earlier research on the foundational value of instructional leadership in K-12 settings (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Lynch, 2012; Neumerski, 2012), and more recent studies focusing on the important role of building principals as organizational *learning leaders* who build the capacity of their staff to enhance student achievement (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2010). Most participants in our study noted that their school leaders positioned themselves as instructional leaders by promoting professional growth aligned with the teachers’ needs and the school goals (Hallinger & Wang, 2015), developing the professional capacity of the whole team (Leithwood et al., 2010), and enabling both formal and informal professional learning opportunities. The leadership aspects of organizational learning are not easy to implement in online programs and virtual schools; efforts are required to locate appropriate resources, acquire funding for online learning workshops and conferences,

and find time in the schedule to bring teachers together. In our study, collaboration that was intentionally structured into the working environment was highly valued by teachers.

### Contextualized Leadership Practices

Beyond these foundational leadership practices, our study suggests that OSL requires nuanced leadership practices based on the unique contexts of online schooling. The category of empowerment emerged as a key component of effective OSL, incorporating specific and intentional leadership practices related to listening, valuing expertise, trust, ownership, and advocacy for online learning. Figure 1 features our framework for online school leadership (OSL).

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework for OSL*



Listening and valuing expertise were two interconnected leadership practices that surfaced from our study. For the online teachers, deep listening on the part of leaders was a foundational first step towards empowering teachers and building a sense of common purpose among staff to work through issues and changes. The findings of our study reflect the work of Shane Safir (2017), who suggests that contextualized leadership requires leaders who are “strategic listeners” (p. 48), listening deeply to others in order to create thriving and vibrant school communities. Our research provides evidence that even in online learning contexts, where face to face interactions are more limited, effective leaders strive to find ways to practice deep listening that honours the voices of all teachers and respects their tacit knowledge and experiences in online teaching.

Our study also suggests that trust is a critical aspect of OSL, which is consistent with the literature on effective leadership practices that prioritize developing positive and trusting relationships (Leithwood et al., 2010; Murphy & Seashore Louis, 2018). Every participant talked about trust as a key element in effective leadership for online learning, sharing that it was important for leaders to be both *trustworthy* and *trusting*. Given the autonomous nature of teachers’ work in online programs, and the focus on individualized, self-paced, and asynchronous learning, there are few opportunities for classroom “walkthroughs” that would allow online school leaders to observe teaching and learning

in action. As such, a high level of mutual trust is required to create the foundation for more dialogic interactions (virtually and in person) that allow leaders to check in on teachers, provide them with feedback, and support them in their professional growth.

Ownership was another important concept that emerged from our research. While traditional models of leadership can be locked into conventional mindsets of expert and novice, our study suggests that effective online school leaders view leadership as a collective enterprise (Spillane et al., 2001), creating a sense of shared ownership in online school programs by recognizing the value of teachers as experts themselves. The concept of ownership reflects the values of shared or distributed leadership (Spillane et al., 2001) and the importance of cultivating a strong sense of collective efficacy (Donahoo, 2016) among staff. The online school leaders in our study succeeded in developing a sense of collective ownership within their programs by intentionally encouraging teachers to share in decision-making, design new programs, and "take the lead" in decision-making. Teachers in these online programs know that their expertise is valued and respected.

In our study, online school leaders' effectiveness was not measured by technological expertise, but rather by the degree to which leaders advocated for teachers, students, and the school itself. This was a concept of leadership that was not apparent in our review of the literature on school leadership, but it was a salient and surprising idea that emerged from our research in online school leadership. The perception of online



education can sometimes create a marginalizing effect within some school districts. Online school programs and schools are often seen as a “last resort” offering for students who are struggling or otherwise disenfranchised from mainstream learning environments.

Advocacy for online learning is about creating a narrative that positions online schools as part of the collective educational programming, while also championing the unique educational benefits that online schooling can provide for many learners. Such advocacy is reflective of the kind of adaptive and nuanced leadership that is required in the ever-changing online world of education today—leadership that wrestles with questions of organizational value and purpose and mobilizes people to thrive in the face of challenges.

#### Limitations

The results of our study are limited to the experiences of six participants teaching in distributed learning programs in two school districts in western Canada. Given our results are based on self-reported perceptions, bias related to positive and negative school leadership experiences or misrepresentation of facts might be a factor. Future empirical research that considers the continued exploration of online teachers’ perceptions of OSL with larger sample sizes would be beneficial. Future research could also consider OSL within new online or blended learning options that have been recently developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic—both in K-12 and postsecondary contexts. How well have school leaders with limited experience in regular online learning contexts been able

to adapt their leadership competencies to address the unique challenges of teaching and learning in these emergency online learning program options? How have the challenges of teaching in isolation in these remote learning programs been addressed by these leaders, and captured in recent research? How can future research in effective online/virtual school leadership practices inform both regular and emergency remote learning programs in the future? Finally, while we recognize that a tangential outcome of this study was to amplify the voices of online teachers, the examination of OSL from the perspectives of school leaders themselves would serve to deepen and define our understanding of leadership in online learning contexts.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Online learning options for students continue to emerge, evolve, and expand given the recent world pandemic, and the increasing numbers of parents and students who are seeking alternatives to face-to-face schooling. There is a pressing need to examine leadership in these unique contexts of schooling. Our research reports that there are foundational and contextualized practices for effective OSL.

Three recommendations have emerged from our research. First, there is a need for education authorities, school districts, and leadership associations to acknowledge and address the unique challenges of leading and teaching in online learning contexts. This

acknowledgement must move beyond the typical focus on funding models and digital learning platforms to confront the more complex challenges, including misconceptions and negative perceptions of online learning programs, online teachers' sense of isolation and marginalization within school districts, and the need for an established infrastructure to support innovative online course and program development. Second, we recommend that online school leaders have access to relevant, quality professional development that is specific to their unique contexts of school leadership. Currently, very few educational leadership programs provide specific preparation for administrators in K-12 virtual schools or online learning programs (Lafrance & Beck, 2014). Leadership programs for OSL should consider specific leadership practices that promote growth, ownership, and agency in online teachers, and should address some of the job-embedded challenges that have been raised by researchers. Lastly, we recommend that school districts consider the nuanced aspects of OSL when determining school placements for administrators. While leaders are often assigned to online educational environments based on their technological skills and knowledge, our study has illustrated the much more critical need for online school leaders with people-oriented mindsets and the ability to humanize virtual spaces and cultivate relationships.

Beck and Maranto (2014) point out that while virtual schools offer "the potential to redesign aspects of educational administration and instruction in ways that empower

teachers” (p. 68), there is “currently little evidence that they are doing so” (p. 59). More recently, in their examination of the research literature in online learning, Arnesen et al. (2019) found that the field of scholarship in K-12 online learning is narrow but growing, with an “infusion of new scholarship” that will “undoubtedly lead to new ideas and trends in this area over the next decade” (p. 25). Our study contributes empirical evidence and a conceptual lens to this small but growing body of literature in K-12 online learning by focusing specifically on effective online school leadership (OSL)—an area of research that has not been adequately addressed in the literature.

Online school leadership (OSL) requires strong leaders with an unrelenting focus on empowering teachers, leading learning, and centralizing the pedagogies and practices of online educators. As Hannah reminded us in her interview, “online does not mean alone”—an important mantra for leaders who are supporting teachers in secondary online learning contexts. Online school leadership (OSL) demands a deeper understanding of the needs of teachers and students and of the “positionality” of online learning within the K-12 system. This kind of leadership is needed now more than ever to move online education beyond the margins of K-12 education.

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