Investigating Roles of Online School Principals

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Abstract

This study explores the instructional leadership skills required from online principals, as defined by one state's (Idaho) adaptation of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards (1996) as a requirement for professional certification. Specifically, this qualitative study examined six sets of paired online principals and teachers who interacted in a supervision/evaluation cycle. A discrepancy theme emerged: Principals viewed themselves as instructional leaders, as defined by ISLLC/Idaho Standard 2—Instructional Leadership—whereas online teachers viewed their online principals as managers. Closing the discrepancy is discussed through changes in leadership behavior and standards. (Keywords: virtual schools, secondary education, instructional leadership, innovation)

In Idaho, principals are trained according to the Idaho Foundation Standards for School Administrators (IFSSA, 2005), a close adaptation of the ISLLC (1996). Both models include six domains: visionary and strategic leadership, instructional leadership, management and organizational leadership, family and community partnerships, professional and ethical leadership, and governance and legal leadership. Both models were developed with principals in brick-and-mortar schools in mind. Are these standards relevant to inform the growing virtual world of school? How does a principal trained in brick-and-mortar standards transfer instructional leadership to online instructional leadership?

The question became more relevant on January 12, 2011, when Idaho's superintendent of public instruction, Tom Luna, presented an innovative plan to change the structure of education in Idaho. Part of his proposal was to provide all ninth grade students with a laptop and to require students to take two online classes a year. Luna's (2011) plan would have allowed districts to offer virtual courses and colleges and universities to "operate successful public charter high schools." If Luna's plan had passed as initially proposed, the demand for virtual course offerings would have grown exponentially. Luna also called for "highly effectively principals" who would be awarded bonuses based on student academic success. Principals would need to learn instructional leadership skills suitable for a virtual world to receive a bonus. Even though the Idaho legislature passed a scaled-down version of Luna's 2011 plan, his proposal energized the conversation regarding secondary online education in Idaho.

Technology for Social vs. Academic Purposes

Cell phones, laptops, electronic readers, and other portable devices are part of student life inside and outside the classroom (Clark, Logan, Luckin, Mee, & Oliver, 2009). Although students are using these devices frequently, they are using them more often for social networking than for academic purposes. Luckin, Clark, Graber, Logan, Mee, and Oliver (2009) surveyed 2,611 students ages 11–16 and conducted 60 focus groups in the United Kingdom. They found:

> … [although] learners are able to complete basic technical operations and follow recommendations about information sources, they encounter difficulties in their attempts to transfer technical know-how (i.e., how to search) into metacognitive know-how (i.e., how to contextualize and conceptualise knowledge content and knowledge contexts). (p. 101)

These findings raise expectations for online teachers: Not only must they teach content, but they also must ensure students are able to effectively apply online resources as part of their learning. Technologies students are using outside of school have the power to improve education if they are employed correctly and if students are instructed in proper academic uses. However, students—both those in the brick-and-mortar and the online school—often have to "power down and feel disconnected when they come to school" (Schrum & Levin, 2009, p. 29). The burden of preparing students to apply technology in either educational environment does not fall to teachers alone; online principals must also assist in this process (Luckin et al., 2009).

Effective Leadership Is Critical for Online Education

Even though there are concerns about rigor and effectiveness, schools are moving forward with online learning because of the benefits. "High school administrators see benefits to online learning programs that overshadow concerns about pedagogical value—the vast majority of their schools are moving forward with their programs and looking to expand them in the future" (Picciano & Seaman, 2010, p. 2). The need for savvy online leadership is increasingly important. Parker (2004) argued:

> Learning technologies can promote powerful connections to content, context, and community. Unfortunately, they can also offer broad access to poorly designed and executed courseware. There are deliberate choices to be made in how to accommodate a generation of students who expect independent investigation, collaboration, and peer contacts to be facilitated in an online environment. (p. 405)

A qualitative description of online leadership becomes necessary, therefore, to illuminate how an online principal serves as an instructional leader, as defined in Standard 2, Instructional Leadership, of the IFSSA (2005).

The estimate for all K–12 students involved with some type of online or blended program in 2009–10 was 1.5 million (Wicks, 2010). Luna's (2011) proposal opened the door for the creation of even more virtual programs in the study's setting. As virtual schools continue to emerge in 2011 and beyond, a discussion of how to lead the online environment becomes essential. Picciano & Seaman (2010) summed it up:

> There is a growing need to examine online instruction in K–12 schools, especially at the secondary level, in order to inform policymakers at federal, state, and local governing agencies who are considering how to expand the use of this technology to improve instruction. (p. 5)

Current and future principals will increasingly find themselves in positions with responsibility for online leadership. With increased accountability for all administrators through governmental programs and increased scrutiny of online education during an economic crisis, how principals meet this new responsibility will determine the online school's viability in terms of teacher performance and student learning.

Idaho and some other states have online teaching standards, but online leadership standards still need to be created. The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) created the National Educational Technology Standards and Performance Indicators for Administrators (NETS·A; ISTE, 2009), which illustrate the important role administrators play in leading technology in education. The five NETS·A indicators are: visionary leadership, digital age learning culture, excellence in professional practice, systemic improvement, and digital citizenship. The NETS·A indicators were primarily designed to guide the administrator's role in implementing computers and other technology into a face-to-face school and stressed the importance of administrator knowledge of technology and technological innovations with the ability to adapt new technologies to student learning needs.

Literature Review

Beaudoin (2003) defined "leadership in distance education" as "as a set of attitudes and behaviors that create conditions for innovative change, that enable individuals and organizations to share a vision and move in its direction, and that contribute to the management and operationalization of ideas" (para 3). Beaudoin (2003) stated, "It is possible to play a leadership role without necessarily being an expert in the field" (para 3). Beaudoin (2003) argued for the significance of leadership in the growing online world:

> Indecision and immobility during these tumultuous times could prove fatal to a number of institutions, and it is the presence of effective distance education leadership in such an uncertain milieu that could well make the difference between success or failure…. The distance education leader,

> whatever other roles he or she may assume, must always maintain the essential role of educator. (para 5)

Beaudoin (2003) posited that leadership is essential online, but he did not illustrate what that leadership should look like in practice.

Tipple (2010) reviewed literature pertaining to the needs of adjunct online faculty at the postsecondary level that leadership should conceivably understand and address. Tipple concluded that educational administrators have great importance to the online school, specifically in "creating an environment in which adjunct faculty members feel inspired to achieve the prescribed goals and objectives, and have the skills and support systems in place to meet students' needs" (para 3). Just as teachers in the online world are encouraged to be the "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage" (Schrum & Levin, 2009, p. 40), Tipple believed the administrator's role "also shifts to a coach and facilitator, as the online adjunct member assumes great responsibility in fulfilling the goals and vision of the institution" (Tipple, 2010, para 4). Tipple (2010) concluded that communication is critical for online educational administrators: "Empathetic communication is based on an emotional appreciation for another's feeling, invoking a feeling of a personal connection and trust" (para 1).

Tipple went on to define effective evaluation and assessment for the online world:

> Leaders who behave like role models, inspire those around them, and simulate innovation and creativity, as well as providing for individualized considerations (support, encouragement, and coaching to followers), all help to bridge the distance barrier between the educational leaders and online adjunct faculty. (para 2)

While Tipple's 2010 research focused on adjunct faculty at postsecondary institutions, it is relevant to online education, especially in secondary virtual schools, such as the case-study school that the first researcher named One Virtual High School (OVHS), where the teachers are part-time, similar to adjunct faculty.

The literature supports the value of instructional leadership as necessary in the online environment. Rice (2009) used the Delphi method to gather stakeholder input regarding the most pressing issues in online education in the future. Her findings suggested the need for strong leadership: "Evaluation of course design and delivery … define and identify characteristics of effective pedagogical practices and technological applications that lead to achievement gains … accountability … developing programs to better assist special needs students … professional development … accreditation/standards" (p. 169). To make gains in the areas suggested by Rice's (2009) participants, online schools need effective leaders who are active in assessing

the program and able to motivate teachers to provide strong commentary on assignments and frequently communicate with their students.

Research has not been conducted on the relationship of online principals and student achievement in their online schools; however, studies have found that principals in brick- and-mortar schools have an effect on the school's performance. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) used meta-analysis to answer the question: "To what extent does leadership play a role in whether a school is effective or ineffective? That is, how much of a school's impact on student achievement is due to the leadership displayed in that school?' (p. 4). They found a correlation of .25 "between principals' leadership behavior and student achievement," which showed that effective principals could raise their students' test scores and ineffective principals might see stagnation or decline in test scores (p. 34). Synthesizing research from Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003), Williams, Cameron, and Davis (2009) concluded:

> The first finding is that leadership matters. The general effect of principal leadership on student achievement has a correlation of 0.25. This means that in schools where teachers on average rated their principal at the 84th percentile of leadership (one standard deviation above the mean), student achievement was 10 percentile points higher on norm-referenced tests. Expressed differently, the studies in the meta-analysis suggest that improving principals' leadership abilities by one standard deviation from the 50th to the 84th percentile can lead to an increase in the average student achievement from the 50th to 60th percentile—a substantial improvement. (p. 1)

Smith and Andrews (1989) summed up the principal's realm of effectiveness for a face-to-face environment: "The effective principal is actively involved in all aspects of the instructional program, sets expectations for continuous improvement and collegiality, models the kinds of behaviors desired, participates in inservice training with teachers, and consistently gives priority to instructional concerns" (p. 13). By Smith and Andrews' (1989) definition, principals must be active, and they must develop professionally to improve the school setting.

Crum and Sherman (2008) interviewed 12 high school principals in an exploratory study of the educational leader's role. They identified "common core leadership principles: developing personnel and facilitating leadership, responsible delegation and empowering the team, recognizing ultimate accountability, communicating and rapport, facilitating instruction, and managing change" (p. 576). One of the emphases of their findings was on the collaborative environment: delegating responsibilities to teachers and allowing them to work within teams to guide the school. These studies (Crum & Sherman, 2008; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Smith & Andrews, 1989; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003) illustrated the importance of principals in face-to-face environments. The results of these studies suggest that a principal would also have a sphere of influence in

the online educational environment because the job description for online principals is similar to that of principals in brick-and-mortar schools, but the space has changed.

In 2009, Regional Education Laboratory (REL) Northwest conducted a study that compared students in virtual charter schools, charter schools, and other noncharter public schools on statewide standardized tests (Burke & Wang, 2010). Consistently, the students in virtual charter schools scored at statistically significantly lower rates than the other two populations included in the study. Students in virtual schools may be a different population than those of the other two populations (Watson, 2007); however, this study took some of those factors into consideration: gender, race, free/reduced lunch status, special education, and English language learning. Although other factors may contribute to differences in these three populations (i.e., students who work or who have children) that could account for score differences, these statistics speak to the need for an effective principal in virtual schools. Statewide tests are one factor by which schools are judged, and under Luna's (2011) proposed plan, these test scores would bear even more weight. A strong principal is needed to shape the direction and raise test scores in the online environment.

Administrators may confuse quantity with quality in the online environment (Tobin, 2004). Tobin (2004) argued that online evaluations should be similar, if not the same, as face-to-face evaluations because quality instruction is quality. He mentioned having teachers complete a self-assessment of their teaching. Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, and Duffy (2001) developed principles for online instruction that several researchers have cited. Palloff and Pratt (2009), in referring to work by Graham et al. (2001), said, "By becoming familiar with the principles of online facilitation, an administrator could develop a checklist that uses the modified seven principles to review an online course and instructor performance within that course" (p. 53). Familiarity with online education is critical for a principal who is evaluating an online class. Saleh and Lamkin (2008) used quantitative methods to design and evaluate a survey for students to evaluate online college courses in a similar to fashion to how students evaluate their face-to-face courses. Their instrument was valid, and most statements were reliable. Unlike Tobin (2004), Saleh and Lamkin (2008) cited research that concluded that online courses must be evaluated in a different way than face-to-face courses. They argued that student assessment is an integral piece of all learning.

Evaluations in the online world should be more frequent and formative (Fang, 2007; Thomas, 2008). Just as online teaching requires more time from teachers in the individualization of instruction (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008), leadership online may also require more time from principals. Leadership is different online, and these studies suggest that it is potentially less difficult because of the transparent nature of the text-based environment and more effective than evaluations in the face-to-face environment.

Most of the studies in online education have taken place at the postsecondary level, and they do not take the unique needs of secondary schools into consideration (Barbour & Reeves, 2008). Black, Ferdig, and DiPietro (2008) argued, "K–12 virtual schooling is a significantly different experience from teaching and learning online at other levels (e.g., adult or higher education). It is also significantly different from teaching K–12 face-to-face" (p. 40). Because secondary students are different from students in higher education, and online education is different than face-to-face, it is important to conduct studies at this level.

Conceptual Framework

Leadership standards, student learning, and classroom environments are changing. Online education has unique realities for which educational administrators routinely do not receive training (Mitchell, 2009). Administrators who lack specific online training may focus on quantity versus quality (i.e., the number of times an instructor responds in the discussion board) (Tobin, 2004). Administrators should have taught an online class or otherwise be familiar with online learning before trying to evaluate teacher performance and student learning (Mitchell, 2009; Tobin, 2004). Instructional leadership and preservice preparation of instructional leaders, therefore, must be examined within the context of the online environment, because the online environment is different from the typical school building and may require a skill set that is different from online principals.

For this study, instructional leadership was defined by Standard 2: Instructional Leadership of IFSSA (2005), an adaptation of ISLLC Standard 2, hereafter IFSSA-2: "The school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of each student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth." The researcher used IFSSA-2 as the primary definition for this study, derived several of the questions on the interview guides from Standard 2, and used the performance indicators for this standard in cross-group analysis. This standard helped illustrate how the online principals' roles as instructional leaders compared to those of principals in brick-and-mortar schools, as the standard was developed for principals in brick-and-mortar schools.

Methodology

The grand tour question that guided this study was: How do online principals serve as instructional leaders, as defined byIFSSA-2? The following subquestions also guided the inquiry:

- How do online principals guide online teacher performance?
- How do online principals improve online student success rates?
- How do online principals monitor online curriculum (rigor, relevance, outcomes)?

Table 1. Online Principal Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Years as a Principal	Years as an Online Principal	Level of Education	Content Area
Bill	1.5	1.5	MA	All
Elizabeth	8	6	MA	English
Terrence	3	1	MA	All
Tyson	9	6	EdD	Health/PE
Chuck	4	4	Ed. Spec.	Social studies
Vern	7	4	MA	Electives

This study examined one bounded system in depth to provide a description of instructional leadership in the online environment from which others may glean information for their own environments. Marshall and Rossman (2006) explained, "The strengths of qualitative studies should be demonstrated for research that is exploratory or descriptive and that stresses the importance of context, setting, and participants' frames of reference" (p. 54). This study was, therefore, exploratory. It was situated at a particular moment in the evolution of online schools, at one virtual high school fictionally named One Virtual High School (OVHS).

Participant Selection

At OVHS, the first researcher purposefully selected 6 online principals from a pool of 17 principal candidates for participation. Creswell (2007) described purposeful sampling as: "The inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (p. 125). The first researcher chose one school in order to immerse herself in that culture and attend many of their programs for online principals as a participant-observer. The researcher was not involved in OVHS in any way and did not know any of the participants prior to this research study. The researcher was an assistant principal in a brick-and-mortar school leading a movement toward blended learning and was therefore interested in online leadership. Merriam (2009) stated, "In qualitative research, a single case or small, nonrandom, purposeful sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many" (p. 45). The focus on one school also allowed the researcher to gain familiarity with the overall organization and it purposes, policies, and personnel. Although each online principal varied in leadership style, the operational parameters for supervision and evaluation of online teachers were the same.

OVHS was a nationally ranked, nonprofit, state virtual school. It was growing rapidly, and it was unique in its legislative funding and pay-for-performance model. OVHS was providing professional development to educators across the state in addition to the courses it offered to students. OVHS used Blackboard Learn 9.0 to deliver all of its courses and developed a student information system (SIS) that interfaced with Blackboard to track

Table 2. Online Teacher Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Years as a Teacher	Years as an Online Teacher	Level of Education	Content Area
Sylvia	33	4	MA	Math
Patricia	10	2	MA	English
Grace	26	4	MA	Science
MaryLou	17	5	MA	Science
Claire	11	6	BS	Health/PE
Tim	16	4	MA	Social studies
Emily	10	<1	MA	Business

communication and other student demographics. OVHS employed full-time technology specialists to assist principals, teachers, students, and districts in accessing their courses. At OVHS, most online teachers and online principals were part-time contractors. OVHS had full-time curriculum specialists who wrote and revised the curriculum. When teachers were assigned to a class, they were given the scripted curriculum and had to request permission to modify the curriculum. Although this limited teachers' academic freedom, it ensured the curriculum was set to state standards.

This study included 6 online principals paired with 7 online teachers, for a total of 13 participants. The OVHS principals were part-time contractors, supervising 10–25 teachers per session. The OVHS principals were primarily assigned to one content area. The first researcher selected one OVHS principal from each major content area: English, math, social studies, science, PE/health, and electives. A lead principal supervised the 17 principals; she was included in a pilot study but not in the final study. Gardiner, Enomoto, and Grogan (2000) conducted a study of mentoring pairs, mentors, and their protégés. The dual perspective on mentoring added to their conclusions because it provided two lenses through which to examine the relationship. The initial design of this study mirrored Gardiner et al. (2000) with six pairs of online principals and online teachers to address instructional leadership from more than one perspective. However, one of the OVHS principals in this study approached virtual classroom walkthroughs in a different manner, and the researcher was unable to observe this approach. To provide a stronger perspective of this OVHS principal's method, the first researcher interviewed two of his OVHS teachers and reviewed their written performance evaluations. For this reason, the paired groups in this study were unbalanced. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the participants' characteristics. All participants were given pseudonyms.

Data Collection and Analysis

The first researcher interviewed all OVHS principals in person, with the exception of Elizabeth, who was interviewed via phone. The principals' initial interviews were 60–90 minutes in length. We interviewed the OVHS teachers via phone, with the exception of Claire and Tim, who we interviewed

in person. The teachers' initial interviews were 30–60 minutes in length. We conducted follow-up interviews in person, by phone, or through e-mail for both principals and teachers when there were additional questions. The researcher used two separate interview guides: one for online principals and one for online teachers. The two interview guides had some parallel structure to address both sides of the relationship, but they also had questions specific to the online principals' and online teachers' roles. The interview guides began with some basic demographic information: participant's name, educational degrees, training in online education, etc. The interview guide for online principals then went on to ask participants about their leadership role in the online environment and how they guide teachers, improve student success, and maintain curriculum. More than half of the questions on the online principals' interview guide were adapted from IFFSA's (2005) Standard 2: Instructional Leadership. The interview guide for online teachers asked about teachers' perceptions of their online principal's leadership style and responsibilities in their classroom. The researcher transcribed all interviews verbatim. To test the validity and reliability of the interview guides, the researcher conducted pilot interviews with three online principals and three online teachers, all from OVHS.

The researcher conducted the first observation at OVHS's summer conference. The researcher attended live sessions for new teachers the first two days of the conference, specifically those that pertained to supervision and evaluation of teachers. The last three days of the conference were held online for returning teachers. The researcher attended portions of the online conference, especially when it involved online principals or supervision and evaluation. The online principals had one in-person meeting, which the researcher attended, in August 2010. The researcher also conducted observations of online principals conducting virtual walkthrough evaluations; the observations were both in-person and via Wimba, a synchronous collaboration tool. With the exception of Elizabeth and Tyson's walkthroughs, the researcher conducted walkthroughs in person with the online principals. The researcher met the online principals at a convenient location for them, where they had their own desktop or laptop. The researcher watched over their shoulders as they went through each teacher's class in Blackboard and made notes in their walkthrough form in Microsoft Excel. In all cases, the online principal had their evaluation forms open on their computers during the virtual walkthroughs, and in some cases, the online principals had prefilled in some comments on the form. The online principals described the steps they were taking and commented on each teacher's performance as they went through. The researcher asked questions when needed. The researcher observed Elizabeth in Wimba. She would call when she was ready to start the observation, and the researcher would log in to Wimba. She would share her screen in Wimba and talk through a headset during the process. As described earlier, the researcher was unable to observe Tyson.

The documents reviewed were: OVHS's Part-Time Principals' Handbook, Part-Time Instructors' Handbook, Strategic Plan, job descriptions for principals and instructors, and evaluation rubrics for principals and instructors. These materials were available on OVHS's website for employee access; the researcher obtained online access to these documents and, in some cases, printed copies. The researcher also reviewed completed teacher evaluations. OVHS's principals were expected to walk through the instructors' classrooms and provide feedback every 2–4 weeks, depending on the length of the class. The evaluations correlated with the performance expectations for teachers, and they were intended to improve teacher, and therefore student, performance. Along with the performance evaluations, the researcher reviewed e-mail correspondence between teachers and instructors when it related to classroom performance and when the online principal provided it. The researcher also reviewed survey data that OVHS had collected from their teachers regarding their perceptions of their online principal. In all, 115 OVHS teachers responded to that anonymous survey, which OVHS conducted in spring 2010 about the fall 2009 classes.

The researcher used the following steps to code the data:

1. After collecting each piece of data, the researcher read through it and wrote some initial theoretical notes.
2. The researcher analyzed data in two stages "within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis" (Merriam, 2009, p. 204).
3. During the coding process, there were three readings of each group. In the first reading, the researcher marked significant statements. After the second reading, the researcher identified emergent themes. During the third reading, the researcher looked for examples of those emergent themes identified during the second reading.
4. The researcher used member checking to verify the themes identified from their group. All participants agreed with the identified themes.

The researcher used the performance indicators for IFSSA-2 for coding across groups.

Results

One of the most prominent and significant findings in this study was a discrepancy between the OVHS teachers' and the OVHS principals' perceptions of the principals' leadership role. OVHS principals in this study viewed their role as instructional—helping teachers so students can be successful—whereas OVHS teachers viewed their online principals as managerial—enforcing the OVHS supervision and evaluation rubric and managerial policies.

The primary policy function of OVHS principals was guiding teacher performance, which may account for OVHS teacher perception that their principals were managerial rather than instructional leaders. The majority of OVHS principals' interactive time with their paired OVHS teachers was

dedicated to evaluating teachers through the school's bonus rubric and communicating with the teachers regarding this evaluation. OVHS principals all commented that they intentionally avoided any "visibility" to the students, so students would focus on the OVHS teacher as the primary contact for the classroom. Therefore, the OVHS principal's primary means to improve students' performance was through their interactive supervision and evaluation of paired OVHS teachers. Curriculum was not a major area for the OVHS principals in this study, as the school's curriculum specialists were dedicated to revising OVHS curriculum. Even though OVHS principals were not engaged with curricular work and did not view it as part of their duty, some of the OVHS teachers desired and expected curricular help from their paired OVHS principals.

Online Principals Guide Teacher Performance

OVHS had a detailed teacher evaluation rubric, and OVHS principals were "in teachers' online classrooms" approximately every 2 weeks using a checklist to measure teacher performance according to the OVHS rubric. OVHS principal Elizabeth described her job as: "I'm overseeing things and evaluating it, doing walkthroughs so the students are successful." But OVHS teacher Patricia observed:

> There's a lot of teachers out there that are sitting in a hole, who are in their own little shell, that they don't take the extra step, and [the bonus pay in the rubric] is the way to encourage it and find that they like it, and a lot of teachers won't do it without a little nudging, and that's part of human nature.

Although it is difficult to associate visibility with an online presence, both Elizabeth and Patricia described OVHS principals as being visible. OVHS teacher Patricia commented:

> It is apparent through her walkthrough observations that [Elizabeth] has visited the class several times. She is detailed in her comments, for she has read the discussion boards and my comments in the gradebook. In addition, if I call her for advice or help, she responds quickly with an answer. Therefore, she seems nearby.

OVHS principal Elizabeth said: "We check [teachers] every 2 weeks, if not more, so there's not any, if you don't have your announcement posted on time, we're going to know, and so we send an email; we make sure that they are doing what they need to do."

The principals built connections through empathy, knowledge, communication, formality, tone, and promptness. OVHS principal Bill had experience as an online high school teacher, which showed in his treatment and evaluations of teachers. Bill commented, "When I developed that first social studies class, I think I got paid 87 cents an hour because it just is so time consuming." He was familiar with all of the work online teachers were doing,

even though it was not always visible, and he tried to recognize the teachers for their work behind the scenes.

OVHS principal Tyson argued that teachers are professionals and will do the right thing without "holding their hand." Tyson reported:

> The single most important predictor, in my mind, of whether learning takes place is actually the teacher in the classroom. It's not books, it's not software, and poor kids or rich kids can all learn equally well. It's the teacher. So, if we don't support and validate their work, and mentor them and nurture them, we're not going to get the best out of them, and the kids aren't going to best out of them either.

OVHS principal Chuck described the individual attention he tried to provide to online teachers, including mock evaluations conducted over the phone with new teachers. However, Tim, one of Chuck's online teachers, argued that online principals, as part-time contractors, cannot be fully present. Tim was aware that most of the online principals also worked full time in face-to-face school buildings, and he could not believe they had time to build him up as an online instructor.

OVHS principal Vern described teachers as motivated to improve their practice. In his first walkthrough of OVHS teacher Emily's classroom, Vern tried to provide specific suggestions for improvement, and his comments were lengthy compared to the other online principals:

> Emily, good job on this first "real" discussion board. I saw that after several days you did not feel like you were getting the kind of posts that you were getting from your students, so you posted more detailed directions. That is a good way to redirect them. This is all a process of getting the students trained to make meaningful statements. One thing that you might try is asking thought-provoking questions. I realize that is not always possible given the original discussion board topic, but as much as you can, try to push students to think a little deeper. Then you will start to get a discussion going. I gave you one point here for having a great presence in the discussion boards.

In this comment, Vern personally recognized Emily by using her name. He then cited a specific example of what Emily was doing well to help her students by redirecting them. Then Vern asked Emily to extend the good work she was already doing by asking more thought-provoking questions. Even as he made this recommendation, he also acknowledged that this is not always possible depending on the constraints of the discussion board topics, which come from the OVHS curriculum specialists rather than from the teachers themselves. Even though Emily received feedback in written form, she assumed Vern wanted what was best for her. OVHS teacher Emily commented, "He reminded me quite politely that this is the place; use these avenues to address those same issues online, so that was helpful."

Online Principals Improve Student Success

The researcher did not observe OVHS principals having any direct contact with students. Even in disciplinary issues, OVHS principals worked with the OVHS teacher and the administrator at the student's brick-and-mortar school. OVHS principal Elizabeth explained that the walkthrough evaluations of teachers are in place to ensure student success because the evaluation rubric is a reflection of best practices in online teaching. OVHS principal Terrence stated that in all aspects of the online class—for example, disciplinary issues or parent concerns—student success has to be the focus to achieve a positive outcome. OVHS teacher Grace described the OVHS principal's support role as "in the background … I don't see them up front and face forward."

Online Principals Work with Curriculum

The researcher also did not observe the online principals working on curriculum. OVHS principal Bill noted, "I want to be an instructional leader, helper, encourager, but I'm also evaluator, and sometimes those roles are in conflict." But OVHS teacher Sylvia wanted curricular support from her online principal: "That's where an online principal would be helpful to help with, how is the class structured and are there modifications that need to be made?"

The themes identified not only emerged from the first researcher's qualitative data, but also from a survey that OVHS conducted in January 2010 regarding its fall 2009 classes. The survey was anonymous and conducted via SurveyMonkey. The survey asked OVHS teachers about varying aspects of their experience teaching for OVHS, including questions regarding their online principals; 115 OVHS teachers responded to the survey. Eighty-six percent (N = 98) of respondents ranked the support the principal has given them as "excellent" or "above average."

Even though OVHS teachers quantitatively ranked their OVHS principals high, there were qualitative comments that were contrary to this. One area that online teachers expressed concern was regarding communication: "very little communication other than evaluations," "E-mail response to questions could be improved. Sometimes my principal took over 24 hours to reply." OVHS teachers desired knowledge from their online principals: "It might be nice to have examples of things teachers do to earn bonus points, get an idea of what you can do," "provide principals who have actually taught for OVHS." Overall, OVHS teachers wanted support from their OVHS principals: "I have found that the principal makes a big difference. Last fall I was told to refer two issues to my principal to handle from my curriculum specialist; both times she dropped it back on me. It was very frustrating." Communication, knowledge, and relationship also were important in the OVHS's survey of online teachers.

Discussion

Case study cannot be generalized to a larger population because it is situated in a particular context. Outside of that context, the results may not be the same. However, "The person who reads the study decides whether the findings can apply to his or her particular situation" (Merriam, 2009, p. 226). As the online world continues to embed itself in education, it is possible that professors of educational administration classes could find this research useful in shaping instruction for preservice educational administrators. It is also possible that principals will find this research useful in informing their practice of supervision in both online and face-to-face settings. Qualitative research is useful even though it cannot be generalized because it explains different phenomena and makes others aware of what is going on in different contexts.

Students' needs are changing (Luckin, et al., 2009; Rosen, 2010; Watson, 2007), the educational landscape is evolving with different accountability formulas and different demands from industry (Christenson, Horn, & Johnson, 2008; Moe & Chubb, 2009), and the role of teacher is shifting (Bender, 2003; Lowes, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 2009). For these reasons, there cannot be a static set of standards for principals that apply in all cases. Online principals increasingly need to be more innovative to help lead and guide this new expanding territory. Online principals cannot simply demand innovation from their teachers to meet changing student needs and different government accountabilities; they have to lead the innovation. Online principals also have to know about online learning, they have to be invested in online learning, and they have to guide their teachers to adapt and change.

To reconcile the differences in perception between how the OVHS principals in this study defined themselves as instructional leaders and how the OVHS teachers defined the online principals as managers, more preparation and more relationship must occur. IFSSA-2 (2005) was applicable to the secondary online principal's role at OVHS; however, there were some innovative pieces that changed each of the performance indicators slightly (see Table 3, p. 156).

Cavanaugh and DiPietro (2011) explained the "80/20 principle" created by Ferdig, Henry, and Mulkey as:

> Eighty percent of what they found happening in a virtual school was common across schools and was based on a shared foundation of effective teaching and management. The remaining 20 percent of what was happening in a virtual school was unique to that school as a result of the school's unique context, the special talents of the personnel, unusual problems that have arisen, or innovations that have been implemented. (p. 3)

The "80/20 principle" relates to the findings of this study: 80 percent of instructional leadership according to IFSSA-2 (2005) was applicable to the online principals in this study. The other 20 percent was where innovation was

Table 3. Instructional vs. Innovational Leadership

Instructional Leadership: Brick-and-Mortar School (Standard 2, Performance Indicators, IFSSA, 2005)	Innovational Leadership: Online School
Develops, implements, evaluates, and refines curriculum	Has knowledge of content area; able to help teachers individualize scripted curriculum for all students; able to collaborate with online teachers and curriculum specialist to ensure that the highest-quality course is provided
Promotes a culture of high expectations	Creates a relationship at a distance through use of synchronous sessions, phone, in-person sessions, and text; is present and visible through frequent and multiple means of communication
Promotes a school environment in which the responsibilities and contributions of [all] are valued	Recognizes teachers by name; references specific examples from teachers' courses and interactions with students; is aware of tone to be encouraging in interactions
Promotes effective and innovative research-based instructional strategies	Has knowledge of online learning and resources for teachers, students, and parents
Researches a variety of information sources to make decisions	Stays current with new trends and finds ways to connect to the millennial students' world through the tools they are using; communicates this research to teachers
Reduces barriers through proactive identification, clarification, and resolution of problems	Less discipline problems in the online world—issues primarily center on plagiarism, cheating, and some harassment; instead of discipline the online principal has to work to ensure that online teachers are helping online students to log onto their computer and engage in the material
Uses data to monitor student achievement	More data is available online, and online principals must learn what is available and how to use it effectively; there is a discernment process about what data effectively illustrates learning
Supervises, evaluates, and assists teachers	Supervises, evaluates, and assists teachers without time or place; building a relationship through distance is critical and helps teachers avoid isolation
Creates a learning environment that recognizes diversity	Recognizes new types of diversity online where skin color or physical disabilities are not visible; differences in dialect, ability to communicate, and opinion are more readily identifiable
Uses and promotes technology	Has knowledge of platform for course delivery and Web 2.0 tools; encourages teachers to step outside the box and try something new
Participates in professional organizations	Participates in iNACOL and other online learning organizations
Promotes instructional goals … that integrate academic, co-curricular, and extracurricular programs	Faces new challenges outside of online school, such as how to merge students' face-to-face classes with online classes and how to get support for students at the local level

required because the educational landscape keeps evolving and changing, and the online principal must make the best decisions based on that environment.

Freedom from disciplinary issues may free up more time for the online principals to focus on curriculum and improving the quality of teaching. iNACOL's standards recommended that teachers of online courses have been students in online courses (Davis, 2010). If this is found to be best practice, then online principals should also have an expectation to understand online courses from the teacher's perspective, which means, ideally, that they would have taught an online class themselves. This would give them more credibility and the ability to speak from experience with teachers regarding what works in the online classroom.

Online principals should facilitate more human contact; most of the contact observed and discussed in this study was through the walkthrough evalu-

ation forms and e-mail, which are impersonal, at best. OVHS teacher Sylvia recommended that the online principals should host faculty meetings online via Wimba so they can talk with their teachers and the teachers can talk to one another. The lead principal admonished all principals to make initial phone contact for the fall session at the August 2010 Principals' Meeting.

Online principals must also have a strong knowledge of online education to be effective cognitive coaches. Tobin (2004) argued that online principals should have taught online. To ask the right questions to prompt reflection and growth, and to build relationships of trust and respect, online principals should have taught online and continue to be involved in professional development activities that directly relate to the online environment. Some topics for ongoing professional development for online principals might include: how to be involved online instructionally, trust/relationship building with staff, how to motivate beyond the bonus, current research articles and best practices which would be resources to draw on.

Principals at OVHS did not have to deal with discipline frequently. This freed them up to focus on other areas of their job, namely the evaluation of teachers. Even when discipline did occur, the home school played a large role in the process, ultimately deciding and carrying out the consequences. The online principal's role then became gathering facts and providing evidence, suggestions, and support for the home school.

The online principals in this study had a wealth of information available to them. All of the communications between online teachers and students or parents was logged in the SIS with comments. All of the class discussions were visible in the discussion board. Blackboard had statistics regarding who logged on, for how long, and what areas they accessed during their time in the course. Most of the online teachers archived their synchronous sessions, so students and the online principals had access to those. All of these data were accessible, but time did not permit online principals to access all of it. The online principals in this study were discriminatory about what to look for. OVHS principal Elizabeth read only the most current discussion board looking for the traits on the rubric; if she did not find what she was looking for, she would open another discussion board. The online principals in this study had access to all of the information about the class, but they still looked at only a snapshot of the courses due to time restrictions.

OVHS principal Chuck described the diversity online as "diverse ideas": "When people express those ideas, we are very, very quick to stop any critical communication, and I think that's probably one area that we probably don't do as well in that we should." New forms of diversity online include: differences in written language, spelling, learning abilities, motivation, life interests, etc. Online principals have to be aware of these issues, as this is one area online discipline issues can emerge, and they need to help their online teachers prepare for it and prevent it to the best of their abilities.

OVHS principals Terrence and Tyson declared their technology skills to not be superior. Online principals should be comfortable with technology, but they should also be aware of emerging technologies and the potential of online learning. OVHS principal Bill commented that some universities used a very basic model of online learning that was purely asynchronous, and was really centered on the discussion of texts in a discussion board and some assignments submitted to the teacher. The online learning of the millennial student that Rosen (2010) and Schrum and Levin (2009) described included avatars, wikis, blogs, games, and executables. Online principals are limiting the environment if they do not have knowledge of beneficial tools and resources.

More research could be conducted at OVHS that could include more of the positions at the school. It would be beneficial to conduct a future study with teachers who are new and/or struggling. There are ethical issues with having online principals identify the teachers who are struggling, if that is the sole criteria for inclusion. However, a research study could ask for volunteer teachers who self-identify as struggling online teachers and then study the support surrounding them, especially from their online principal. It would be useful to conduct similar studies with online principals from other high schools. A similar case study could also be carried out at a brick-and-mortar school. The innovation that was deemed necessary for online principals in this study may reach those in brick-and-mortar schools who are encountering new technology filtering into their buildings.

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