

ABSTRACT

LEADING FROM A DISTANCE: THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL PRINCIPAL AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER

by

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The rapid expansion of K-12 virtual schools presents a timely and necessary opportunity to examine the role of the virtual principal. The principal is regarded as the primary instructional leader of the school (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). There is limited research on the way online principals serve as instructional leaders. This mixed-method, sequential exploratory study sought to narrow this research gap and illuminate the way transactional distance (dialog, structure, and learner autonomy) informs the virtual principal's practice. I adapted Philip Hallinger's (1985) framework for assessing the instructional management behavior of principals and modified his self-assessment tool to create the Online Principal Instructional Management Scale (OPIMRS). The OPIMRS measured the frequency with which online principals performed 50 discreet leadership tasks aligned to 10 overarching instructional leadership behaviors. I ran a descriptive analysis and determined the mean responses for each of the 50 instructional leadership tasks measured on the survey. A small subset of the survey respondents participated in a follow-up interview to further substantiate their responses and elaborate on their perceived responsibilities of their role. I used Moore's (2005) Theory of Transactional Distance as a lens for interpreting my results. My survey and interview

results suggested that the online principals performed instructional leadership tasks associated with 8 of the 10 instructional leadership behaviors measured on the OPIMRS. The interview participants also reported that they frequently engaged in tasks related to legislative action, which were not measured on the OMPIRS. The results suggested that online principals consider dialog, structure, and, to a lesser degree, learner autonomy in their work. This study opens up possibilities for further research on the instructional leadership behaviors of online principals and the implications of dialog, structure, and learner autonomy on the future of virtual schooling.