

# Mentor principals as key facilitators in aspiring leaders' residency programs: the role of school–university partnerships in effective principal preparation

Sarah A. De La Garza, Fernando Valle, Dusty L. Palmer,  
Irma L. Almager and E. Vanessa de León  
*Department of Educational Psychology, Leadership, and Counseling,  
Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, USA*

Journal of  
Educational  
Administration

379

Received 3 January 2025  
Revised 3 June 2025  
1 October 2025  
25 November 2025  
31 December 2025  
Accepted 5 January 2026

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This qualitative research study examines the experiences of aspiring leaders who completed a school-to-university 15-month field-based residency, proceeded through the principal pipeline, successfully secured an assistant principal position, and grew into a campus principal or district leader.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors use an exploratory narrative qualitative design to investigate the impact of principal mentoring from a leadership exchange lens years after program completion. The following research question guided this study using the experiences of four principal residency program graduates: What mentoring and leadership exchanges do aspiring leaders identify as most influential during a 15-month residency? A deductive analysis approach informed by leader–member exchange (LMX) theory framed the study's findings.

**Findings** – The study's findings categorized the high-quality exchanges between the mentor principal and the aspiring leader in four areas: (1) empowerment through guided autonomy, (2) open dialogue and feedback, (3) modeled leadership practices, and (4) systems thinking and strategic leadership. The low-quality exchanges involved (5) outsourcing mentoring activities to other individuals and (6) a lack of instructional leadership.

**Originality/value** – The study's findings contribute to the literature in multiple ways. First, this exploratory study investigates the post-program impact of a principal preparation program and their mentoring experiences several years after aspiring leaders completed their field-based leadership residency in their home district. Secondly, the findings operationalize an effective mentor principal, the lynchpin of all preparation programs, within a LMX framework. Lastly, the practices described from field-based residency experiences are important feedback on program structures and expectations for future aspiring leaders.

**Keywords** Principals, Partners, Leadership development, Schools, Mentoring, Universities, Leader–member exchange (LMX)

**Paper type** Research article

## Introduction

In the post-COVID era, school principals and heads worldwide face increasing pressures for school improvement, student learning and student welfare. School demands present complex challenges, especially for current and aspiring leaders who lack specialized preparation or training (Bush, 2022). A sustainable principal pipeline of qualified professionals is necessary to address the current context. The principal is saturated with sixty-plus hour work weeks and elusive expectations, leading learning amongst adults amid accountability pressures, all while sustaining effective and inclusive engagement with all school populations. This scenario

© Sarah A. De La Garza, Fernando Valle, Dusty L. Palmer, Irma L. Almager and E. Vanessa de León. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at [Link to the terms of the CC BY 4.0 licence](#).



Journal of Educational Administration  
Vol. 64 No. 4, 2026  
pp. 379-393  
Emerald Publishing Limited  
e-ISSN: 1758-7395  
p-ISSN: 0957-8234  
DOI 10.1108/JEA-12-2024-0447

would challenge even the most well-prepared, stable, and experienced teacher and leader workforce (Darling-Hammond and Hyler, 2020). High-quality educator preparation programs are built around a coherent vision with well-defined standards and model research-based, effective practices in courses that integrate strong clinical experiences and performance assessments (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2019).

School-to-university principal preparation partnerships allow aspiring leaders to apply their knowledge and develop skills in real settings, fostering collaboration with district partners to intern, hire and develop principals (Wang *et al.*, 2022; Palmer *et al.*, 2021). The real-world complexities that aspiring leaders face during their internship range from developing instructional leadership skills, analyzing data, engaging in reflective praxis and building relationships with multiple communities. Quality learning opportunities during field-based internships, including problem-based learning opportunities, are critical for principal preparation (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2022). These applied learning opportunities are a challenge in most traditional leadership preparation programs (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2022). This study examines a decade-long school-to-university principal preparation partnership as a 15-month field-based residency program in Texas. A residency is a state-funded partnership between an organization and a low-performing district, where aspiring leaders undergo a full-time, year-long clinical experience at one school, functioning as an assistant principal with an emphasis on leading school turnaround efforts (Wang *et al.*, 2018). This program facilitates high-quality interactions among aspiring leaders, mentor principals and university faculty coaches to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for effective instructional coaching, data-driven decision-making, continuous school improvement and relationship-building.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the mentoring and leadership exchanges experienced by aspiring leaders during their 15-month residency program in Texas. Structured experiential opportunities, guided coaching and sustained mentoring enabled aspiring leaders to engage in meaningful reflection and internalization of leadership practices. Without purposeful dialogue and critical exchanges between university faculty, district leadership, mentor principals and aspiring leaders, the residency experience risks becoming a procedural requirement rather than a transformative process that cultivates leadership capacity and professional identity. Guided by a mentoring and coaching residency program foundation, this study explores the following research question: What mentoring and leadership exchanges do aspiring leaders identify as most influential during a 15-month residency? The authors argue the efficacy of these field-based opportunities and exchanges is enhanced when collaboration between experienced, adept mentor principals provides support and guidance in developing instructional leadership skills. Mentor principals bridge the gap between theory and practice, ensuring aspiring leaders are well-prepared to meet the role's challenges. An intentional residency and field-based experience, supported by comprehensive guidance, lays a strong foundation for aspiring leaders' professional development and future success (Boyland *et al.*, 2022; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2022).

### State context for principal residency programs

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) delegates leadership preparation and certification at the state level, and federal grants to state educational agencies fund principal residency programs. Residency programs must include evidence-based coursework where aspiring leaders receive continuous support from an effective mentor principal or school leader, and states create grants to support turnaround efforts (U.S. Congress, 2015). The Texas Education Agency (*n.d.*) recognizes root cause analysis as a job-embedded support in instructional leadership development programs. Consequently, principal preparation programs can train aspiring leaders in root cause analysis as a framework to identify data trends and frame coaching conversations with support and feedback (Texas Education Agency, *n.d.*). Districts select their participants and hire them as full-time administrators while they

complete master's-level coursework toward degree completion and principal certification (Rangel *et al.*, 2024a). The principal residency program that is the focus of this study adopted several evidence-based practices, including root cause analysis, from other highly effective programs nationwide.

### Literature review

This study integrates research on principal preparation, school-to-university partnerships and mentoring. The first strand summarizes the foundational elements of principal preparation programs, including the importance of improvement efforts. The second strand focuses on collaborative school-to-university partnerships and field-based experiences, and the third strand highlights high-quality mentorship within these field-based experiences for aspiring leaders.

#### *Influence of principal preparation programs*

Recent research on principal preparation and leadership development reveals a changing landscape of school leadership. Blackman and Fenwick (2000) describe the modern school leader as simultaneously fulfilling the roles of “servant-leader, organizational and social architect, educator, moral agent, child advocate and social worker, community activist and crisis negotiator” while also being responsible for improving student performance (p. 68). This expansion of responsibilities necessitates a comprehensive approach to principal preparation to effectively lead school improvement. Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2022) identified several key elements of high-quality principal preparation focused on instructional leadership, people development, organizational management and change management. However, access to important job-based learning opportunities (e.g., internships, applied learning and mentoring or coaching) is still lacking (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2022). Grissom *et al.* (2021) conclude that, given the scope of principal effects across an entire school, “It is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership” (p. 43).

Principal preparation programs' influence can be examined by the alignment of national and state standards and practices. Boyland *et al.* (2022) assessed the effectiveness of a university's principal preparation program against the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards and revealed aspiring leaders felt well-prepared for their leadership roles in organizational management and instructional leadership. The study also highlighted the need for continuous improvement, especially in providing more job-embedded learning experiences. Johnson (2016) found that while university programs enhanced overall preparation, gaps in areas like school budget management and data analysis existed. The literature on principal preparation underscores the importance of aligning programs with real-world demands and providing comprehensive, practical training that addresses all aspects of school leadership.

#### *Improvement efforts*

Today's principals must be ready to lead turnaround efforts that prioritize efforts to improve outcomes for all students. Consequently, the integration of targeted training in the continuous improvement of principal preparation is a necessary innovation. Richard and Cosner (2024) argue persistent educational inequities have underscored the need for K-12 principals to effectively support diverse students. They further assert effective leader preparation and development is crucial for equipping school leaders with the knowledge and skills to create inclusive and equitable learning environments. Centering improvement efforts, such as a principal preparation program's vision to impact school districts, can significantly impact student outcomes (Richard and Cosner, 2024).

Residency programs have adopted intensive, immersive approaches to principal preparation. Aspiring leaders trained in full-time residencies receive holistic coaching and

mentoring in various aspects of principal development (Palmer *et al.*, 2019, 2021). These programs focus on skill-building for school improvement, equity-driven data analysis, progress monitoring instruction and implementing instructional coaching best practices. Principal residency programs can significantly enhance the preparedness and effectiveness of aspiring leaders (Palmer *et al.*, 2017, 2021). Principals prepared in residency programs are better equipped to handle leadership complexities, including managing diverse student populations and implementing equity-focused initiatives (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2022; Boyland *et al.*, 2022). Residency and field-based intensive programs often include rigorous assessments and continuous real-time feedback, which help aspiring leaders develop the necessary skills and competencies to lead successful schools.

#### *School-to-university partnerships*

The literature on school-to-university partnerships highlights several successful practices and rationales for preparing teachers and aspiring school principals. These partnerships are driven by a shared strategic vision, mutual commitment and resources pooling to achieve greater impact and effectiveness (Eady and Green, 2024; Wang *et al.*, 2022). Universities and districts have partnered with national non-profit organizations to redesign principal preparation programs to support recruitment, retention and effectiveness. Principal residencies, such as the principal residency network in Rhode Island (Braun *et al.*, 2013), began as early as 2000. The Wallace Foundation's early efforts in strengthening the principal preparation pipeline began in 2011 with six sites (Anderson and Turnbull, 2019). Subsequently, the Wallace Foundation funded seven university-district partnerships from 2016 to 2021 that resulted in university, district and state leaders aligning standards, curriculum, clinical experiences, policies and practices (Herman *et al.*, 2022).

District leadership described the aspiring leaders as valuable assets, as they coach teachers, attend and serve in special education meetings, lead parent conferences, analyze assessment data and provide student support (Palmer *et al.*, 2019). Rangel *et al.* (2024b) found that aspiring leaders in a residency reported more time dedicated to professional growth, student affairs and instructional leadership. Aspiring leaders in traditional programs focus more on community and parent relations, planning and setting goals and instructional leadership, with a greater likelihood of observing rather than leading (Rangel *et al.*, 2024b). Participants in a two-year residency partnership found that the aspiring leaders in a high school administrative role were "linked to an additional 15% of a school-level standard deviation in math scale scores and an additional 3.6% points in graduation rates, but also an additional 10% points in high school suspension rates" (Steele *et al.*, 2021, p. 224). These studies illustrate how aspiring leaders in their field-based residencies positively influence their school contexts.

Established partnerships between leadership preparation programs and districts create an opportunity for universities to be a trusted and proactive partner in addressing a district's professional development needs. The assistant principalship can be a stopping point for those needing targeted support in areas like instructional coaching (Gurley *et al.*, 2013; Hayes and Burkett, 2021; Searby *et al.*, 2017). District leadership's anticipation of retirements and leadership turnover creates opportunities for university partners to establish targeted cohort-style programs to center powerful learning experiences for aspiring leaders (Osworth *et al.*, 2023). The district stakeholders' trust in the university partner's responsiveness is essential for maintaining a mutually beneficial and trusting relationship for current and future students (Sanzo and Wilson, 2016).

#### *Mentorship and field experiences in principal preparation*

Effective principal preparation programs have evolved to address the complex demands of modern school leadership by incorporating mentorship, field experiences and comprehensive skill development. The collaboration between universities, school districts and current school administrators informs the preparation program's design with the shared goal of producing

leaders capable of navigating the multifaceted challenges of educational administration (Parylo, 2013).

Mentorship for aspiring leaders plays a crucial role in leadership development and capacity building. Mentoring relationships should include career and psychosocial functions (Kram, 1985; Kram and Higgins, 2009). Principals who received mentoring during their early professional life gained significant benefits from the process (Yirci and Kocabas, 2010). This underscores the importance of identifying and implementing high-quality mentoring opportunities across the early stages of a principal's career. Field experiences and internships are essential components of principal preparation programs. These experiences allow aspiring leaders to engage fully with all stakeholders in the school and in a different environment from where they work (Roberts, 2019). Many programs struggle to provide consistent, high-quality field-based experiences that allow candidates to engage with the real demands of school leadership under qualified mentors (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2022; Virella and Cobb, 2022). Principal preparation programs rely on campus leadership as the lynchpins to provide real-world experiences, practical insights and a supportive environment for both aspiring leaders and new principals (Medeiros, 2001). Current principals provide aspiring leaders with instructional leadership opportunities required to meet the position expectations beyond the degree, certification and licensure (Virella and Cobb, 2022). Principals help aspiring leaders develop critical skills such as instructional leadership, strategic planning and effective communication (Medeiros, 2001). Access to job-based learning opportunities, such as internships, applied learning, and mentoring or coaching, remains limited and varies by program and state (Virella and Hobb, 2022). The authors note effective principal preparation programs typically include critical content focused on instructional leadership, people development, organizational management and change management. By leveraging the mentor principals' expertise and meaningful field experiences, programs can better prepare aspiring leaders for the complex challenges of educational leadership (Parylo, 2013). Ultimately, the mentor principal is a key partner that provides authentic, continuous and immediate feedback that aspiring leaders need.

#### *High-quality mentoring*

Mentorship within principal residency programs is central to developing aspiring leaders' capacity. Mentoring relationships should capture the essence of endeavors, participant roles and the intended outcomes (Dominguez and Kochan, 2020; Shea, 1994). This study mirrors a sponsored mentorship arrangement prioritizing the aspiring leader's career advancement and advocacy as primary outcomes, and personal growth and confidence as secondary outcomes (Clutterbuck, 2007; Eby *et al.*, 2007; Kram, 1985). Through role modeling, mentors provide opportunities for aspiring leaders to internalize effective "attitudes, values, and behavior" (Kram, 1985, p. 33). The intersection of these essential elements provides the foundation for high-quality mentoring within leadership preparation programs.

In job-embedded residency programs, effective mentorship is characterized by the consistent presence of experienced mentors and supportive relationships that foster reflection, leadership growth and instructional effectiveness (Almager *et al.*, 2021). Behaviors such as asking probing questions, giving transparent feedback and encouraging professional learning create collaborative environments in which aspiring leaders apply leadership competencies in authentic contexts (Bloom *et al.*, 2003; Almager *et al.*, 2021). High-quality mentoring in leadership preparation is a dynamic, reciprocal process grounded in collaborative engagement, coaching and purposeful feedback.

#### **Theoretical framework: leader-member exchange (LMX)**

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory offers valuable insights for educational leadership, particularly in mentor principal-aspiring leader relationships. The LMX theoretical lens offers

a rich framework for exploring the principalship pipeline experience and the development of mentoring relationships of current educational leaders. LMX posits that leaders develop differentiated relationships with their subordinates, ranging from high-quality to low-quality exchanges (Erdogan and Bauer, 2014). High-quality exchanges reflect mutual respect, shared commitment and a sense of responsibility, wherein leaders grant followers greater autonomy, influence and access to professional opportunities (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Schriesheim *et al.*, 2001). Low-quality exchanges involve more formal, role-defined interactions. Followers produce efforts that meet basic expectations, while leaders provide standard organizational benefits (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) describe the three phases of leadership making: stranger (phase 1), acquaintance (phase 2) and partnership (phase 3). In the partnership phase, the high degree of reciprocity between the mentor principal and aspiring leader becomes a transformational relationship as each moves beyond self-interest and focuses on the team and organization (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Within principal preparation and mentorship, high-quality exchanges between the mentor principal and aspiring leader feature mutual respect, shared responsibility and a strong sense of commitment, leading to increased effort and loyalty. Low-quality exchanges involve minimal effort and rely primarily on formal organizational structures. The communication between a leader and their subordinates can be characterized by in-group and out-group dynamics (Northouse, 2010). A leader's relationship with individuals in the out-group is marked by "formal communication based on their job description" (Northouse, 2010, p. 150). In contrast, in-group dynamics are typically defined by mutual respect, positive rapport and balanced exchange of influence (Northouse, 2010). Northouse (2010) notes that "Subordinates in the in-group receive more information, confidence and concerns from their leaders than those in the out-group" (p. 150). This approach sought to collect valuable insights from aspiring leaders now serving as principals to inform preparation programs, support future aspiring leaders and provide a mentoring framework for faculty coaches/researchers working with state agencies on educational initiatives.

### *Study context*

The Aspiring Leaders Residency Program (ALRP) is a premier principal preparation model in the state and nation. The pilot initiative of the current ALRP launched in 2012–2013 and transformed into the state's inaugural competency-based principal residency program. The educational leadership faculty structured the student-centered program using a collaborative coaching model to ensure graduates have the skills and dispositions to support historically marginalized student populations in their residency and future leadership positions.

The four participants completed and graduated from the ALRP and are current elementary, middle, or high school principals. Table 1 details the demographic characteristics of the participants and their schools. These data were from 2022–2023 state accountability reports (Texas Education Agency, 2023). Numbers are rounded to the nearest 10th and 100th, and the aggregate percentages are reported to avoid school re-identification and protect participant confidentiality. The students of color category includes all non-White racial and ethnic categories.

### **Methods**

A narrative design is appropriate to address the research question, as it focuses on the processes and features of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, narrative design engages one or more individuals to share information on the distinctiveness of their experience while exploring the issue of high- and low-quality exchanges and group dynamics with their mentors (Creswell, 2013; Northouse, 2010). LMX theory provides a framework to characterize the study's illustrative examples around quality, degree of investment and behaviors seen in both exchange types (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Schriesheim *et al.*, 2001).

**Table 1.** Demographic profile of participants and their current schools

Participant characteristics			Campus characteristics					
Case study ID	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	School name	Count N	Special education %	Free-and-reduced lunch %	Emergent bilingual %	Students of color %
Principal A	Male	White	Campus A	300	20	100	10	100
Principal B	Female	Latina	Campus B	400	20	100	10	100
Principal C	Female	White	Campus C	600	30	90	10	90
Principal D	Female	White	Campus D	200	20	80	10	70

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

Purposeful sampling was the most appropriate method, as the research team selected participants to deepen the understanding of the research question and key events (Creswell, 2013). This exploratory study takes a qualitative, narrative approach, investigating the impact of principal mentoring from a leader-exchange lens years after program completion. The following sections describe the participant selection criteria, data collection approaches and analytical methods.

#### *Participant selection*

The invited participants were selected using purposeful sampling criteria to illustrate the exemplar (high-quality) and non-exemplar (low-quality) interactions between aspiring leaders and their mentor principals. The selection was based on a triangulation of student feedback, intensive faculty coach support and instances where aspiring leaders excelled or had difficulty meeting residency requirements. These participants are drawn from a population of approximately 120 graduates. This sampling strategy enabled the faculty to critically examine how program structures, field-based experiences, curriculum design and coaching sessions influenced participants' development. All participants completed a full-time residency, obtained their principal certification and persisted through their school district's leadership pipeline to assistant principal and principal positions post-program completion. Furthermore, all completed the program at least five years prior to the study, offering a valuable long-term perspective. This study contributes to the literature by exploring the post-program impact of high-quality and low-quality exchanges in a residency and how those experiences shaped participants' leadership trajectories.

#### *Data collection*

Prior to data collection, the authors obtained approval from the university's Institutional Review Board committee. Participant recruitment occurred either via telephone or email. If participants agreed to be interviewed, they selected the time and place most convenient for them. Before the interview, each participant was informed about the study's purpose, asked for consent to be interviewed and audio recorded, and procedures to maintain confidentiality.

Each participant participated in a 45–60-min semi-structured interview. The interview questions focused on five areas: (1) quality of the relationship with the mentor principal; (2) specific examples of how the mentor principal supported their development; (3) how the residency experience influenced their current mentoring practices; (4) high- and low-quality exchanges with the mentor principal; and (5) challenges in developing other high-quality relationships during their residency. The semi-structured interviews allowed a flexible approach and opportunity to gather in-depth insights from current leaders on their experiences as aspiring leaders in the residency program. The interviews were audio-recorded at the participant's choice of location and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.

### *Data analysis*

The following research question guided this study: What mentoring and leadership exchanges do aspiring leaders identify as most influential during a 15-month residency? A deductive analysis approach was used on the interviews in the first and second coding cycles with an a priori coding scheme derived from the conceptual framework, research questions and key variables of interest (Miles *et al.*, 2020). The a priori codes were based on the characteristics of high- and low-quality exchanges and relationships, including mutual respect, availability of support and resources, reciprocity, role development, and opportunities for feedback and learning (Northouse, 2010). The second coding cycle implemented a variable-oriented approach (Miles *et al.*, 2020) because all participants were interviewed on pre-determined codes from LMX theory. This strategy within a cross-case analysis was appropriate, as the purpose was to generalize as much as possible key events or characteristics of high- and low-quality exchanges (Miles *et al.*, 2020; Northouse, 2010). Similar statements and experiences were generalized into analytical statements based on key concepts in LMX theory. The cross-case analysis allowed an in-depth understanding of how the residency impacted the aspiring leaders' future leadership practices (Miles *et al.*, 2020). A member-checking interview was conducted with a fifth program graduate to enhance the study's validity (Miles *et al.*, 2020).

### *Study limitations*

One study limitation is its small sample size. The purposeful sampling highlights the extreme examples of high- and low-quality leader–member exchanges between a mentor principal and the aspiring leader. Despite the small sample size, the demographic profile of the participants' home districts reflected the geographic diversity served by this program. Given the time between program completion and data collection, study participants may not recall all the mentor principal's actions that framed their experience.

## **Results**

The study's findings categorized the high-quality exchanges between the mentor principals and the aspiring leaders in four areas: empowerment through guided autonomy, open dialogue and constructive feedback, modeling of professional expectations and development of instructional leadership. These high-quality exchanges reflect an in-group dynamic, as there is a high degree of trust, respect, and obligation between the mentor principal and aspiring leader (Northouse, 2010). The low-quality exchanges involved the outsourcing of mentoring activities to other individuals and a lack of instructional leadership. These low-quality exchanges reflect an out-group dynamic based on the lack of a mentor's responsiveness or unidirectional influence of exchange between the mentor principal and aspiring leader (Northouse, 2010).

### *High-quality exchanges*

*Empowerment through guided autonomy.* Empowerment in this residency program context involves the aspiring leaders' ability to practice school improvement efforts by coaching struggling teachers and addressing non-academic areas such as discipline or attendance. This empowerment is developed based on a set of specific structured program expectations shared between the university and district partnership. The process of facilitating the aspiring leader's learning allowed the aspiring leader to impact teachers and students while internalizing practices, behaviors and systems. Rather than withholding responsibility, mentor principals actively involved aspiring leaders in key leadership functions, ranging from district meetings to sensitive staff conversations, creating authentic opportunities.

One critical practice in this developmental process was the mentor principal's transparency in explaining campus operations and the rationale behind decisions. Principal B shared how these moments demystified the mentor principal role: "That was the best piece of it. She talks

me through every meeting at the beginning . . . She unpacked it all.” Principal B further emphasized the importance of the freedom to take initiative and learn through experience: “She gave me the opportunity to just do. That was huge. When you have someone who will teach you but also trust you to make mistakes.”

Interestingly, the mentor principal’s years of experience did not necessarily determine the quality of the exchange. For example, Principal B’s mentor principal was in their first year in the position. However, the mentor principal structured the relationship with several shadowing and mentoring opportunities, including invitations to district meetings, home visits and difficult conversations with staff members.

Participants echoed the significance of safe, open dialogue with their mentors. Principal A described their mentor principal’s willingness to reflect, listen and problem-solve together: “He offered me a chance to ask a lot of questions, to throw out suggestions . . . walk me through whether that would work . . .” Principal D shared a similar description of their mentor principal. Like the previous two program graduates, this aspiring leader emphasized the importance of the “think aloud” in their relationship. In this example, the combination of the open dialogue and the targeted feedback were important coaching practices for the aspiring leader. They shared,

I think the mentor is probably the most critical component of the fellowship. It has to be someone willing to sit down and have the conversation with you and to walk you through the hard things and do the hard things with you, give you hard feedback just like your person in your fellowship would, just like [Faculty Member] did for us.

The supportive relationships developed between mentor principals and aspiring leaders fostered structured role development and meaningful leadership growth. Mentors who provided consistent guidance while gradually releasing responsibility allowed aspiring leaders to engage in leadership tasks with increasing independence. By involving aspiring leaders in authentic, context-specific activities, such as decision-making, community engagement and staff leadership, mentors helped build both practical skills and confidence essential for future leadership roles.

*Modeled leadership practices.* A common practice reported among high-quality exchanges was the consistent mentor principal’s modeling of professional behavioral and leadership practices. Rather than relying solely on verbal feedback, effective mentors modeled behaviors through their daily actions and interactions, providing tangible examples for aspiring leaders to observe and emulate.

Two participants described how their mentor principals consistently modeled responsibilities ranging from routine operational tasks to high-level leadership tasks. For instance, Principal B shared how her mentor principal modeled a full spectrum of campus responsibilities, from cafeteria duty to making attendance phone calls, demonstrating that no task was beneath the principal’s role. These lived experiences showed how aspiring leaders internalized school leadership expectations.

Principal D similarly reflected on their mentor principal’s influence, noting that their mindset on improving systems and modeling a relentless pursuit of excellence: “Even if things were going well, I think his mentality was what can we do better, or how can we make it better.” As Principal D transitioned into a new role, he recognized the absence of such modeling and its impact: “At that point, I felt like my principal trusted me so much, there was never feedback.”

While structured feedback loops were valued, the modeled behaviors and routines most strongly reinforced leadership expectations. Participants emphasized that seeing their mentor principals handling difficult conversations, leading PLCs, or managing campus operations offered more impactful learning experience than verbal feedback alone. Modeling served as a form of embedded professional development, illustrating not just what to do, but how to do it with intentionality and professionalism.

*Systems thinking and strategic leadership.* The participants gained valuable insight into effective leadership when mentor principals demonstrated how to lead across interconnected

areas such as school culture, instructional priorities and organizational systems. Principal D reflected on the importance of being paired with a mentor who modeled comprehensive leadership across all core facets of school operations:

One thing I want to say is the fellow has to be with a highly effective principal in all facets of school whether that's—well, it has to include culture and the academic piece and systems. I think Mentor Principal Z was a great model for that. I found myself as I transitioned at a campus where all of those pieces were there except the academic pieces and saw how that really impacted the culture on the campus even still.

Similarly, Principal A described at length how their second mentor principal emphasized data-driven decision-making to inform campus instructional expectations. For example, they shared,

As we were running through Teach Like A Champ[ion] and data-driven, as we were doing some of those pieces, I was really was able to help him or [him] and the assistant principal, at that time, refine their data presentation processes, how PLCs were data-driven, some of the reflections that we were doing during teacher observations and walkthroughs.

This participant's description highlights how the mentor principal had an organizing framework integrating the aspiring leader into the "in-group," and reinforced these expectations through campus routines (PLCs) and observations (instructional walkthroughs). Principal A tracked curriculum standard mastery by analyzing exit tickets and growth performance data as part of their Response to Intervention process. This aspiring leader's experience reflects his integration into the leadership team and operation in coordination, not simply transactionally. Furthermore, Principal A noted their residency experiences positively contributed to their readiness to transition into the assistant principalship.

The aspiring leaders' inclusion in high-level tasks was important for their residency experience. Their "in-group" membership for strategic decision-making positively impacted aspiring leaders' perceptions of their experiences. Aspiring leaders in reciprocal relationships with mentors felt more engaged and willing to contribute, enhancing the overall quality of the mentorship experience. This collaborative learning dynamic strengthened both the internship quality and the participant's leadership capacity.

#### *Low-quality exchanges*

Two participants shared experiences reflective of low-quality exchanges and out-group dynamics with their mentor principal. The first example illustrates how the delegation of mentoring responsibilities to other individuals is an out-group interaction due to the absence of the aspiring leader's active engagement (Northouse, 2010). The second example reflects an out-group and unbalanced exchange of influence and shifted responsibility toward the aspiring leader – uncharacteristic of a balanced interaction by in-group members (Northouse, 2010).

*Delegation to others.* One participant experienced a placement change due to challenges with the original mentor principal. This mentor principal's division of tasks among the leadership team hindered the aspiring leader's ability to be easily integrated into the campus. Principal A described several instances where they asked the mentor principal to participate in planning processes for campus-wide systems such as the master schedule and curriculum implementation. Prior to this participant's reassignment to a new mentor principal, their first mentor principal placed the responsibility on the aspiring leader to seek the assistant principal responsible for the said task with limited discussions on how to integrate the aspiring leader into the tasks. Principal A described their mentor principal's response, "That's this AP. They've got a process that they're pretty particular on." This aspiring leader found themselves occupied with self-initiated tasks, "I found myself mostly doing a lot of just data reviews, side projects and things like that."

Principal C described a reverse coaching experience with their mentor principal. Principal C reflected on how they coached their mentor principal through an exchange of ideas. They

noted, “With [them], really it turned into me, I guess, teaching [them] how to be a principal.” This participant’s experience contrasts with the other aspiring leaders’ examples because the open dialogue and feedback loop were absent. Instead, they felt as if the campus decision-making unofficially shifted to them as the student.

*Lack of instructional leadership.* One participant’s challenge illustrates the importance of a mentor principal’s expertise in instructional leadership, not just campus operations. Aspiring leaders excluded from leadership tasks felt their growth was limited, emphasizing the need for mentors to actively involve aspiring leaders in instructional leadership activities to maximize learning opportunities. Principal C described the administrator as “hidden most of the time” and “really uncomfortable” in addressing instruction. Consequently, Principal C described their placement as unfamiliar with professional learning communities and data analysis. Leadership turnover allowed this aspiring leader to assume the interim principal role and focus on instruction. They relied on university faculty coaching and district leadership as support in their instructional leadership development during the residency. This participant implemented some instructional coaching strategies they learned, such as root cause analysis (i.e., an Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats [SWOT] analysis) and a focus on two or three “bite-sized” areas of improvement with teachers.

## Discussion

The present study explores how the structure of high- and low-leader-member exchanges impacted aspiring leaders’ experiences during their residency. By unpacking how the high-quality exchanges led to empowerment through guided autonomy, open dialogue connected to feedback, modeled leadership practices and systems thinking with strategic leadership, the value of instructional leadership development and mentor feedback was clearly highlighted.

### *Instructional leadership development*

The instructional leadership emphasis for these current school leaders during their residency program corroborates the importance of this learning dimension (Palmer *et al.*, 2019; Rangel *et al.*, 2024b). The aspiring leaders’ instructional leadership development occurred via structured support and role development in collaboration with the mentor principal and university faculty. Mentor principals that exposed interns to diverse responsibilities prepared them for future roles by providing context-specific knowledge and practical experience. Consequently, these high-quality exchanges and in-group dynamics reflect mutual respect, shared commitment and reciprocal influence (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Schriesheim *et al.*, 2001). Aspiring leaders experienced greater autonomy and influence within the school context, reinforcing the benefits of high-quality developmental exchanges (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Schriesheim *et al.*, 2001).

### *Role of feedback*

Mentor principals served not just as instructional leaders but as executive leaders of school-wide coherence, modeling how systems, from culture to academics, interact and reinforce one another. This role modeling impacts the aspiring leader’s future leadership practices (Kram, 1985; Clutterbuck, 2007). The high level of engagement and reciprocal relationship between the mentor principal and aspiring leader led to feedback-driven growth and the aspiring leaders’ inclusion in critical tasks. Mentor principals’ feedback reinforced learning and growth as the aspiring leaders valued a structured feedback loop, which encouraged self-reflection and improved performance over time. These feedback loops reflect a high degree of reciprocity (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Aspiring leaders who experienced this type of dyadic relationship reflect “in-group” dynamics (Northouse, 2010). Aspiring leaders excluded from leadership tasks reflect the consequences of an out-group dyadic relationship (Northouse, 2010). The “out-group” treatment limits the residency’s efficacy and intended purpose. The mentor principal’s actions and support extend beyond Blackman and Fenwick (2000)’s

definition of the modern school leader. The ability to facilitate high-quality exchanges directly impacts the residency experiences often lacking in principal preparation programs (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2022). University faculty addressed the mentoring gap for the aspiring leader who did not experience role modeling (Kram, 1985).

#### *Implications for practice*

Principal preparation programs must actively support mentor principals to ensure high-quality exchanges for the aspiring leader. Consequently, programs may need to monitor and support mentor principals closely to ensure they maximize the aspiring leaders' field-based learning opportunities. Consistent and open communication between the university program, district leadership and campus mentor ensures an aspiring leader's success in a residency program.

#### *Implications for research*

The study's exploratory narrative design and purposeful sampling of illustrative examples of both extremes of leader-member exchanges provide an opportunity to unpack the mentor's behavior, discussion topics, feedback quality and attention to instructional leadership. While this study emphasized the reflections of aspiring leaders now serving as principals, research is needed on how mentor principals in residency programs adapt their coaching or feedback styles after several years serving in this role. Palmer *et al.* (2017) have explored district perspectives on the residency's impact on schools, but research is needed to uncover how district leadership selects, supports and monitors mentor principals. Furthermore, research is needed on how mentor principals view aspiring leaders' implementation of improvement efforts and how, if at all, they incorporate the aspiring leaders' work after the residency.

#### *Implications for policymakers*

Policymakers can support principal residency programs through sustained funding for existing programs and allocate additional funding to develop new school-to-university partnerships. State education agencies can capture these school-to-university partnerships and principal residency programs' impact by analyzing growth in outcomes such as student achievement, leadership and teacher retention, and teacher evaluations.

### **Conclusion**

This study explores leadership-member exchanges and a mentor principal's impact several years after aspiring leaders complete a field-based leadership residency. High-quality exchanges resulted in aspiring leaders' (1) empowerment through guided autonomy, (2) open dialogue and authentic feedback, (3) modeled leadership practices and (4) systems thinking and strategic leadership. These elements enhance the aspiring leaders' capacity to navigate school leadership demands. Highly effective mentor principals engage aspiring school leaders in all facets, including school culture, academic accountability and effective systems. The effectiveness of mentoring opportunities depends on the relationship quality (Hayes and Mahfouz, 2020). Thus, low-quality exchanges resulted in the (5) outsourcing of mentoring activities and (6) an absence of instructional leadership. Programs must adapt and refine mentorship practices to meet the challenges and changing needs of school leaders. Consequently, school-to-university partnerships should prioritize the development of these components within their districts and preparation programs to cultivate more competent, confident and context-ready school leaders.

### **Acknowledgments**

Thank you, Drs. Ricardo Garcia and Edna Garcia (Texas Tech University), for your thoughtful comments during the revision process.

---

**References**

- Almager, I.L., Cumby, S. and Almekdash, M.H. (2021), "Developing human capital through instructional leadership: learning to coach during principal preparation", *Open Journal of Leadership*, Vol. 10 No. 02, pp. 169-192, doi: [10.4236/ojl.2021.102012](https://doi.org/10.4236/ojl.2021.102012).
- Anderson, L.M. and Turnbull, B.J. (2019), *Sustaining a Principal Pipeline*, The Wallace Foundation, New York, NY.
- Blackman, M.C. and Fenwick, L.T. (2000), "The principalship: looking for leaders in a time of change", *Education Week*, Vol. 19 No. 29, pp. 46-68.
- Bloom, G., Castagna, C. and Warren, B. (2003), "More than mentors: principal coaching", *Leadership*, Vol. 32 No. 5, pp. 20-23.
- Boyland, L.G., Quick, M.M., Geesa, R.L., Sriver, S.K. and Dyke, E.M. (2022), "Effectiveness of principal preparation per the NELP Standards: an assessment of one university's performance", *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 23-40.
- Braun, D., Billups, F.D. and Gable, R.K. (2013), "Transforming equity-oriented leaders: principal residency network program evaluation", *Education Leadership Review*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 1-24.
- Bush, T. (2022), "Challenges facing school principals: problems and solutions", *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, Vol. 50 No. 4, pp. 533-535, doi: [10.1177/17411432221096238](https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432221096238).
- Clutterbuck, D. (2007), "An international perspective on mentoring", in Ragins, B. and Kram, K. (Eds), *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 633-656.
- Creswell, J. (2013), *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed., SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Darling-Hammond, L. and Hyler, M.E. (2020), "Preparing educators for the time of COVID... and beyond", *European Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. 43 No. 4, pp. 457-465, doi: [10.1080/02619768.2020.1816961](https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1816961).
- Darling-Hammond, L., Oakes, J., Wojcikiewicz, S., Hyler, M.E., Guha, R., Podolsky, A., Kini, T., Cook-Harvey, C., Mercer, C. and Harrell, A. (2019), *Preparing Teachers for Deeper Learning*, Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Wechsler, M.E., Levin, S., Leung-Gagné, M. and Tozer, S. (2022), "Developing effective principals: what kind of learning matters?", *Learning Policy Institute*, Washington, D.C.
- Dominguez, N. and Kochan, F. (2020), "Defining mentoring: an elusive search for meaning and a path for the future", in Irby, B.J., Boswell, J.N., Searby, L.J., Kochan, F., Garza, R. and Abdelrahman, N. (Eds), *The Wiley International Handbook of Mentoring: Paradigms, Practices, Programs, and Possibilities*, John Wiley & Sons, Oxford, UK, pp. 41-58.
- Eady, M.J. and Green, C.A. (2024), "School-university partnerships: a richly woven tapestry to share and continue", in Green, C.A. and Eady, M.J. (Eds), *Creating, Sustaining, and Enhancing Purposeful School-University Partnerships: Building Connections across Diverse Educational Systems*, Springer Nature Singapore, Singapore, pp. 435-447.
- Eby, L.T., Rhodes, J.E. and Allen, T.D. (2007), "Definition and evolution of mentoring", in Allen, T.D. and Eby, L.T. (Eds), *The Blackwell Handbook of Mentoring: A Multiple Perspectives Approach*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, UK, pp. 7-20.
- Erdogan, B. and Bauer, T.N. (2014), "Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory: the relational approach to leadership", in Day, D.V. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Leadership and Organizations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, pp. 407-433.
- Graen, G.B. and Uhl-Bien, M. (1995), "Relationship-based approach to leadership: development of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory of leadership over 25 years: applying a multi-level multi-domain perspective", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 6 No. 2, pp. 219-247, doi: [10.1016/1048-9843\(95\)90036-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/1048-9843(95)90036-5).
- Grisso, J.A., Egalite, A.J. and Lindsay, C.A. (2021), "How principals affect students and schools: a systematic synthesis of two decades of research", *The Wallace Foundation*, New York, NY.

- Gurley, D.K., Anast-May, L. and Lee, H.T. (2013), "Developing instructional leaders through assistant principals' academy: a partnership for success", *Education and Urban Society*, Vol. 47 No. 2, pp. 207-241, doi: [10.1177/0013124513495272](https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124513495272).
- Hayes, S.D. and Burkett, J.R. (2021), "Almost a principal: coaching and training assistant principals for the next level of leadership", *Journal of School Leadership*, Vol. 31 No. 6, pp. 502-525, doi: [10.1177/1052684620912673](https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684620912673).
- Hayes, S.D. and Mahfouz, J. (2020), "Principalship and mentoring: a review of perspectives, evidence, and literature 1999-2019", *Research in Educational Administration and Leadership*, Vol. 5 No. 3, pp. 722-751.
- Herman, R., Wang, E.L. and Gates, S.M. (2022), *Collaborating on University Principal Preparation Program Redesign (RAND Principal Preparation Series, Volume 3, Part 3)*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA.
- Johnson, A.D. (2016), "Principal perceptions of the effectiveness of university educational leadership preparation and professional learning", *NCPEA International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, Vol. 11 No. 1, p. 14.
- Kram, K. (1985), *Mentoring at Work: Developmental Relationships in Organizational Life*, Scott, Foresman, & Company, Glenview, IL.
- Kram, K.E. and Higgins, M.C. (2009), "A new mindset on mentoring: creating developmental networks at work", *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Vol. 50 No. 3, pp. 1-7.
- Medeiros, S. (2001), "Mentoring aspiring principals to improve principal preparation", Dissertation, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Miles, M.B., Huberman, A.M. and Saldaña, J. (2020), *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 4th ed., SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Northouse, P.G. (2010), *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 5th ed., SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Osworth, D., Cunningham, K.M.W., Hardie, S., Moyi, P., Gaskins, M. and Osborne Smith, N. (2023), "Leadership preparation in progress: evidence from a district-university partnership", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 61 No. 6, pp. 682-697, doi: [10.1108/jea-01-2023-0009](https://doi.org/10.1108/jea-01-2023-0009).
- Palmer, D.L., Valle, F., Almager, I.L., Cihan, M.A., Nguyen, C.P.H., Cumby, S.K. and De León, V. (2017), *Examining an Embedded Principal Internship Program through a Partnership of District and Higher Education*, American Educational Research Association, San Antonio, TX, April 27 – May 1. available at: <https://www.aera.net/Publications/Online-Paper-Repository>
- Palmer, D.L., Almager, I.L., Valle, F., Gabro, C. and De León, V. (2019), "Using equity audits to create a support system for marginalized students", *School Leadership Review*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 1-24, 9.
- Palmer, D.L., Valle, F., Almager, I.L., De León, V. and Gabro, C. (2021), "Mentoring job-embedded principal residents", *International Journal of Arts, Humanities, and Social Science*, Vol. 2 No. 4, pp. 14-24.
- Parylo, O. (2013), "Collaborative principal preparation programs: a systematic review and synthesis of qualitative research", *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, Vol. 8 No. 2, pp. 177-191.
- Rangel, V.S., Drake, T.A., Butcher, K.A. and Seaton, L.E. (2024a), "A synthesis of research on principal internships", *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 95 No. 5, pp. 1013-1052, doi: [10.3102/00346543241261984](https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543241261984).
- Rangel, V.S., Butcher, K. and Farmer, M. (2024b), "A comparison of the internship experiences of aspiring school leaders in a principal residency and traditional principal preparation program in Texas", *Journal of School Leadership*, Vol. 34 No. 4, pp. 321-340, doi: [10.1177/10526846241245077](https://doi.org/10.1177/10526846241245077).
- Richard, M.S. and Cosner, S. (2024), "Centering equity within principal preparation and development: an integrative review of the literature", *Education Sciences*, Vol. 14 No. 9, p. 944, doi: [10.3390/educsci14090944](https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14090944).

- Roberts, G.A. (2019), "Usefulness of field experience component of a principal preparation program", Dissertation, Walden University.
- Sanzo, K. and Wilson, J.M.I. (2016), "Stakeholder experiences in district-university administrator preparation partnerships", *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 1-20.
- Schriesheim, C.A., Castro, S.L., Zhou, X. and Yammarino, F.J. (2001), "The folly of theorizing 'A' but testing 'B': a selective level-of-analysis review of the field and a detailed Leader-Member Exchange illustration", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 12 No. 4, pp. 515-551.
- Searby, L., Browne-Ferrigno, T. and Wang, C. (2017), "Assistant principals: their readiness as instructional leaders", *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 397-430, doi: [10.1080/15700763.2016.1197281](https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2016.1197281).
- Shea, G. (1994), *Mentoring: Helping Employees Reach Their Full Potential*, American Management Association Membership Publications Division, New York, NY.
- Steele, J.L., Steiner, E.D. and Hamilton, L.S. (2021), "Priming the leadership pipeline: school performance and climate under an urban school leadership residency program", *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 57 No. 2, pp. 221-256, doi: [10.1177/0013161x20914720](https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x20914720).
- Texas Education Agency (2023), "2023 Texas academic performance report (TAPR)", available at: [https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/tapr\\_srch.html?srch=C](https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/tapr_srch.html?srch=C)
- Texas Education Agency (n.d.), "Instructional leadership development (focused on observation-feedback cycle): recommended use of funds", available at: <https://tea.texas.gov/finance-and-grants/grants/grants-administration/applying-for-a-grant/rufsp1instructional-leadership-development.pdf>
- U.S. Congress (2015), *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, Public Law No. 114-95*, U.S. Government Publishing Office, Washington, D.C.
- Virella, P.M. and Cobb, C.D. (2022), "Leader developers: perspectives of mentor principals in an administrator preparation program", *Journal of Educational Supervision*, Vol. 5 No. 3, pp. 81-99, doi: [10.31045/jes.5.3.4](https://doi.org/10.31045/jes.5.3.4).
- Wang, E.L., Gates, S.M. and Herman, R. (2022), *District Partnerships with University Principal Preparation Programs*, RAND Foundation, Santa Monica, CA, Vol. 3.
- Wang, E.L., Gates, S.M., Herman, R., Mean, M., Perera, R., Tsai, T., Whipkey, K. and Andrew, M. (2018), *Launching a Redesign of University Principal Preparation Programs: Partners Collaborate for Change*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA.
- Yirci, R. and Kocabas, I. (2010), "The importance of mentoring for school principals: a conceptual analysis", *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 1-7.

**Corresponding author**

Sarah A. De La Garza can be contacted at: [sardelag@ttu.edu](mailto:sardelag@ttu.edu)