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# Commentary: Reflections and possibilities for school-university partnerships

Partnerships between schools and universities for the leadership development of school leaders has long been a feature in many contexts and has a substantial history that can be traced at least back to the time surrounding the formation of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) in 1959. The formation of the council began a global interest in the preparation and support for school leaders by universities and led to the formation of many important professional educational leadership service groups like the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS; <https://www.belmas.org.uk>), the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (CCEAM; <https://cceam.info/about-cceam/>) and the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL; <https://www.ancel.org.au>). In 2026 there are journals devoted to the topic (e.g. School University Partnerships), special interest groups in major research networks (e.g. AERA School-University Partnership Research SIG 79) and dedicated books (e.g. [Acquaro and Bradbury, 2023](#); [Gomez et al., 2023](#)). Nevertheless, the role of universities in leadership preparation and development, and in partnering with schools and systems to do this work, is not necessarily common across the world ([UNESCO, 2024](#)). Where it is evident, it is sometimes under threat through government policy changes prioritizing diversification of suppliers of professional learning and/or the rise of many other organizations wanting to do this work ([Greany and Kamp, 2022](#); [UNESCO, 2024](#); [Greany et al., 2025](#)). This special issue is then a timely piece to consider the work that universities, schools and systems can do to support school leaders.

Partnerships broadly are a known feature of successful schools (e.g. [Gurr et al., 2022](#)), school professional learning communities (e.g. [Bolam et al., 2005](#)), and school improvement initiatives (e.g. [Hopkins et al., 2011](#)), and feature in contemporary views of educational leadership (e.g. [UNESCO, 2024](#)). In terms of leadership development partnerships, much is known about these partnerships, and within this special issue there are papers with excellent reviews of the knowledge base that build on what is known. Effective school-university partnerships for leadership development tend to be: research-based; use targeted recruitment; have curricular coherence with strong emphasis on the cutting-edge educational leadership theories; provide experience in authentic contexts with close ties with schools in the community and on-the-ground training under the wing of expert principals; use cohort groupings and mentors; and enable collaborative activity between the program and area schools ([Davis et al., 2005](#); [Davis and Darling-Hammond, 2012](#); [Young, 2015](#); [Darling-Hammond et al., 2022](#); [Gomez et al., 2023](#)).

A nine-paper special issue is notable and especially at a time when many journals receive far more papers than they can accommodate in regular issues. This special issue has a foundation in the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN), which is an academic and professional network group associated with the international arms of UCEA and BELMAS, and has a collection of academics and some practitioners from more than a dozen countries across the world (see <https://www.isldn.com>). Originally conceived as a special issue of the work from ISLDN scholars, the issue has four papers involving five members of this group: Angelle, Årlestig, Barnett, Klar and Okilwa. Perhaps responding to the criticism of journals for promoting academic cronyism through limiting special issue scope ([Macfarlane et al., 2026](#)), this issue was made an open call and has five papers beyond scholars from the ISLDN collective. To better understand the scope of the special issue, [Table 1](#) provides the paper title and author(s), country location, research focus and methods used, and reproductions of the stated findings from each paper.



**Table 1.** Summary of papers in the special issue

| Paper title and author(s)  | Country location | Focus and methods  | Stated findings   |
|--|------------------|--|---|
| Reflections on a decade of a school-university partnership: Graduates' perceptions of long-term program influence<br>Okilwa and Barnett  | USA              | This study looked back on program benefits and challenges of participants several years out from the participation in a university/district leadership development master's program<br><br>Seven focus group interviews with 31 participants that were comprised of 12 campus leaders, 16 classroom teachers and two district level program coordinators<br><br>Part of a larger study. The larger study included two university faculty and six district leaders  | Benefits included engaging in influential tasks and activities, altering their perspectives and practices and sustaining cohort relationships; challenges were coping with work-life balance, course demands and changing program expectations  |
| Mentor principals as key facilitators in aspiring leaders' residency programs: the role of school-university partnerships in effective principal preparation<br>De La Garza, Valle, Palmer, Almager and Leon | USA              | This study looked back on the impact of mentor principals on participants five or more years out from a 15-month university/district residency leadership development program<br><br>One individual interview with each of four participants   | 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) modelled 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.        |
| Learning within a Principal and Researcher Collaboration<br>Benerdal and Årlestig  | Sweden           | This paper explores the work of 15 principals engaged in a range of learning activities – external input, feedback, self-study, experiential learning, collegial exchange and structured reflection – as part of a multi-year partnership between a municipality and a university<br><br>The paper uses written principal reflections from six learning activities and written researcher reflections from two learning activities and from continuous reflection as the data sources<br><br>Part of a larger study, which was not described | Results indicate that learning and development, seen as leadership actions, is closely connected. It is therefore necessary to nuance and visualise both direct and indirect signs of learning and sensemaking. Long-term partnerships and a combination of various activities and feedback provide a solid foundation for understanding how processes contribute to new knowledge and working methods for both practitioners and researchers |

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**Table 1.** Continued

| Paper title and author(s)   | Country location | Focus and methods  | Stated findings   |
|---|------------------|--|---|
| Leveraging University-District Partnerships to Prepare School Leaders for Equity<br>Jackson   | USA              | This paper explores perceptions about impact on program participants in leadership development programs from 15 program directors, staff and faculty from 11 principal preparation programs in one state. Thirteen semi-structured interviews lasting 45–90 min were the data sources<br><br>Part of a larger study, which was not described   | The analysis revealed four major themes that characterized how these relationships support programs' equity-oriented efforts: recruitment and admission, internship, two-way learning and program evaluation and continuous improvement   |
| Building a positive school culture using continuous improvement: leadership development in a research–practice partnership<br>Pauffer, Klar and Carter                    | USA              | This study used field notes, artifacts, participant observations and interviews with a principal and their coach in a university-led leadership development program as the principal engaged in the research–practice partnership to use improvement science to build a positive school culture<br><br>Part of a larger study. This paper reports on only one principal. It is not clear how many principals were involved in the larger study | The study identified three findings. First, the leader learned to use the concepts and tools of improvement science to define a problem of practice. Second, the leader learned to identify and select high-leverage change ideas to improve the problem. Third, the leader applied what she learned to lead systemic change in her school  |
| “Connecting the dots”: a social network study of inter-organizational partnerships for designing equity-centered principal preparation programs<br>Awaludin and Halverson | USA              | This research explored the Equity-Centered Pipeline Initiative (ECPI) which is a Wallace sponsored program to prepare school leaders who have a social justice orientation<br><br>Three surveys over 18 months of key, knowledgeable ECPI actors were conducted, with responses analysed through social network analysis of the evolution of the network over time   | The ECPI network evolved from a loosely connected set of early partnerships, largely between university representatives and technical assistance providers, into a more cohesive, inclusive and interconnected system. Over time, district actors emerged as central brokers. The findings also show increasing network density, reduced fragmentation and the growing integration of state agencies and community organizations. SAOM results underline the influence of both endogenous/ internal factors (e.g. reciprocity, transitivity) and exogenous/ external ones, particularly role homophily (i.e. individuals with the same role tended to collaborate with each other), in shaping partnership dynamics |

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**Table 1.** Continued

| Paper title and author(s)   | Country location           | Focus and methods  | Stated findings   |
|---|----------------------------|--|---|
| By Māori, for Māori: community partnerships for culturally sustaining schools<br>Angelle, Upson and Knight  | New Zealand                | This research was focused on school-community partnerships that enhance knowledge and relationships of principals and schools with Māori students and families<br><br>There were individual interviews with seven participants: three principals, an interim principal, two Kaitiaki (cultural brokers) and one community partner/Māori Iwi representative<br><br>Part of a larger study. It is not clear what the larger involved or why the three schools described in this paper were chosen. It seems that the three schools may be examples from the larger study | Through the voices of the school leadership and their partners, the path to diversity through collaboration with the Māori community has widened. Partnerships with Māori elders and Māori community leaders provided professional development in the culture and language of the Māori people. Findings provide evidence that partnerships have increased knowledge and recognition for the Māori students and their culture in the school community. Respect for the non-dominant Māori culture has grown throughout the school community, including teachers, staff and families |
| Crossing the ocean virtually: a pilot exchange between universities in the United States and Bosnia and Herzegovina<br>Shiffman and Sijamhodžić-Nadarević | USA and Bosnia Herzegovina | This study explored virtual exchanges of US doctoral leadership students and BH masters and doctoral religious pedagogy and theology students<br><br>Secondary analysis of existing data focused on the intercultural and educational leadership learning in two collaborative online international learning (COIL) programs. Data sources were artefacts (program materials and student work) from the 2 faculty who led two COILs and 40 student who participated in these (12 from the USA and 18 from BH)  | Reported learning emphasized reflection focused on cultural attitudes, knowledge and skills; intercultural and interlinguistic awareness; intercultural team functioning; and educational leadership, system and policy comparisons. Supports for and challenges to reported learning were structural, curricular and instructional in nature   |
| Developing and Sustaining School Partnerships in a Networked Improvement Community: The TAMAM Project<br>Hayes, Mahfouz and Karami-Akkary                 | Middle East                | This study explored a school/university partnership network across several Middle East countries, and which was focused on school improvement – TAMAM.<br><br>Eight members of the TAMAM leadership steering committee and the project director were individually interviewed to explore the project and how it supported schools to improve. Leadership development was part of the process   | Findings reveal five themes that are instrumental in developing and sustaining a NIC partnership: a (1) laser-like focus on the improvement process; (2) shared leadership focused on common mission and goals, (3) human development, growth and empowerment, and (4) leading and learning across varying contexts and (5) relational trust as the glue of the network   |

The issue is dominated by research focused within the USA, with five papers exploring USA leadership development programs, and one involving virtual exchange between students in the USA and Bosnia and Herzegovina, but with only the USA students involved in leadership preparation. The other country contexts were the Middle East, New Zealand and Sweden. The dominance of studies from the USA is perhaps not surprising given the prevalence of these types of programs in the USA.

The special issue is partially about school-university partnerships for leadership development, with the first six papers having this focus. The last three papers explored school-community partnerships with Indigenous groups in New Zealand (Angelle *et al.*, 2026), learning exchanges between graduate school leadership students in the USA and graduate religious pedagogy and theology students in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Shiffman and Sijamhodžić-Nadarević, 2026), and school improvement partnerships in the Middle East (Hayes *et al.*, 2026). This provides a rich special issue about partnerships broadly, but with an emphasis on leadership development partnerships.

Research methods were mostly of small to medium-scale qualitative studies relying on individual and/or group interviews for primary data collection (six papers), with the other papers relying on program materials and student work artifacts produced by participants (Shiffman and Sijamhodžić-Nadarević, 2026; Paufler *et al.*, 2026 also used participant artifacts), written participant reflections (Benerdal and Årlestig, 2026) and surveys and network analysis (Awaludin and Halverson, 2026). Six of the papers were reporting on part of a larger study or reanalyzing data from a larger study (see Table 1), and sometimes a paper was used to providing an explanatory or descriptive case study as an exemplar from a larger study (Paufler *et al.*, 2026). These types of papers can generate reader interest in pursuing other papers about these projects. The smaller scale of these papers does however mean that trustworthiness, transferability and veracity may be more limited.

The quality of the papers is high, as to be expected from papers published in *The Journal of Educational Administration*. The findings are all of interest and make important contributions to knowledge. Though the contributions often confirm understandings we already have, the articles in the special issue add to understanding partnerships for professional learning through exploration of under-researched contexts such as rural areas (Paufler *et al.*, 2026) and working with Indigenous communities (Angelle *et al.*); special leadership development programs such as those preparing equity-focused school leaders (Jackson), or engaging in research partnerships (Benerdal and Årlestig, 2026; Paufler *et al.*, 2026); different program roles like mentor principals (De La Garza *et al.*, 2026). The reporting about long standing programs and impact over time are also noteworthy contributions as these papers engage with long term impact and/or sustainability issues (Awaludin and Halverson, 2026; Benerdal and Årlestig, 2026; De La Garza *et al.*, 2026; Okilwa and Barnett, 2026). Novel findings come from the paper by Awaludin and Halverson (2026) which explored the application of social network analysis to a complex leadership preparation program, the paper from Hayes *et al.* in their description of a school improvement network across several Middle East countries, and the paper by Shiffman and Sijamhodžić-Nadarević (2026) on a virtual graduate exchange program.

This brief commentary has hopefully created reader interest to explore the special issue in detail and provided something of a map for the reader to delve into papers of particular interest. The six papers focused on leadership preparation provide rich detail and more examples to extend our knowledge, whilst the other three papers provide diverse examples of other university partnerships.

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