

“It makes me an academic leader in the classroom”: a qualitative case study of the impact of a university–school partnership

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Abstract

Purpose – This case study explores the impact of a partnership between a regional university in south central Texas and a low-performing middle school. The purpose of the study is to examine how two teachers’ instructional practices evolved due to the partnership, which was initiated to provide both academic support and financial incentives to schools facing significant challenges and closure by the state.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs a critical ethnographic approach (Carspecken, 1996; Creswell & Creswell, 2018), focusing on the experiences of the two teachers within the context of the collaboration. This method enables an analysis of the teachers’ engagement with culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Paris & Alim, 2017) and how the partnership influenced their classroom instruction in a school on the brink of state receivership.

Findings – The findings reveal that, despite initial difficulties brought on by the 2020 pandemic, the partnership led to significant positive changes in the teachers’ pedagogical choices, classroom environments and their connections with students. Both teachers expressed that the partnership allowed for greater creativity and innovation in their teaching, which addressed previous feelings of constraint due to external pressures and structures. Nevertheless, the study also highlights ongoing challenges for the school and the university, signaling that effective university–school partnerships require further development.

Originality/value – This research contributes original insights into the potential of university partnerships to foster educational innovation. It also emphasizes the complexities of such collaborations and the ongoing work needed to make them fully effective in supporting sustainable improvements in struggling schools.

Keywords Case study, University–school partnerships, Culturally sustaining pedagogies, Culturally relevant pedagogies, School partnerships

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In 2017, the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 1882 (SB 1882), opening new pathways for school districts to improve and innovate by partnering with external entities such as open-enrollment charter schools, institutions of higher education (IHEs), non-profits, or government agencies. Designed to provide both academic support and financial incentives, SB 1882 encourages schools to reimagine their educational models to address long-standing challenges. The legislation offers increased state funding for eligible schools and a two-year exemption from specific accountability interventions (Texas Education Agency, 2021).



Despite the state-wide opportunity, as of 2024, only 87 school partnerships have been established under SB 1882, with only 17 involving partnerships with Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs). This is significant in two ways: (1) only 87 schools out of nearly 9,000 campuses (less than 1%) have taken advantage of this state-wide program, and (2) less than 20% of those 87 schools have chosen to partner with a college or university. The reason why so few schools have chosen to embark on the SB 1882 journey, and even fewer have chosen an IHE as their partner, is unclear and warrants further investigation. This relatively low engagement suggests a gap in either awareness or willingness to explore this model, particularly in collaboration with universities. Our study aims to address this gap by examining one partnership established in the fall of 2020 between a public school and a university operating as the managing partner under SB 1882.

This paper investigates the success of this university-school partnership in fostering meaningful educational transformation. More specifically, it explores how the university's role as the managing partner reshaped the school's instructional model, guided by a framework of culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Paris, 2012). These pedagogies provided a foundation for creating an educational environment that honored the community's cultural and linguistic assets, aligning with the legislation's goal of revitalizing schools through innovative practices.

By centering culturally sustaining pedagogies within the partnership, this study examines how the collaborative effort between the school and university contributes to rethinking traditional university-school partnerships. Unlike past models, which often involved universities using schools as sites for research with minimal reciprocal benefits (Walsh & Backe, 2013), our partnership sought to build a community of trust, shared goals, and mutual learning. In doing so, it offers insights into the potential for SB 1882 to inspire more equitable and culturally attuned school reform efforts beyond Texas.

Purpose

This case study examines the experiences of two teachers in a university-school partnership supported through state funds and with a design model in which the university partner becomes the school's operating (i.e. managing) partner. Our partnership was developed from the SB 1882 legislation, which allows schools to partner with outside agencies to redesign and restructure the school campus.

According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) website,

Senate Bill 1882, signed into effect by the Texas Legislature in 2017, provides incentives for districts to contract to partner with an open-enrollment charter school, institutions of higher education, non-profits, or government entities. These incentives include:

- (1) A potential increase in state funding for the partnered campus. Each partnered campus that meets eligibility requirements is entitled to receive the greater of either the amount of state funding to which the district would be entitled or the amount of state funding to which an open-enrollment charter school would be entitled. . .
- (2) An exemption from certain accountability interventions for two years. Specifically, the agency may not impose that the campus prepare and submit a turnaround plan. . . (TEA, 2021)

The website lists 87 active SB 1882 school partnerships across Texas. Three of these partnerships were launched in the 2018–2019 school year, while the others started between 2019–2020 or the current 2024–2025 school year. Our partnership began in the fall of 2020. The SB 1882 legislation allows school districts and charter schools to restructure a school campus with the intent of changing and improving the instruction in the school. This restructuring can be in the form of a *school of innovation*, where the campus becomes wholly reimagined with a specific and dedicated campus focus (for example, a fine arts, language, or

technology academy) or a *turnaround model* (for schools that have had consistent failing or near failing campus ratings from the state and are in danger of being reconstituted by the state). Our partnership fell into the latter category. However, both the school and the university took the opportunity to reimagine and re-envision what teaching and learning could look like on the campus.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework we used to develop the partnership and to focus this study was culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, b, 2003, 2014, 2021; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017). Culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies provide a foundation for teachers and administrators to create learning experiences, and establish the school environment, that is responsive and relevant to the cultural experiences of the students and families within the school community. This attention honors and celebrates the cultural practices and values of the community and extends to language. Culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies are expected to support the community by fostering multilingualism and multicultural practices throughout the school. Paris (2012) stated:

The term culturally sustaining requires our pedagogies to be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, then, has an explicit goal of supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers. (p. 95)

Culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies create an environment for school personnel to connect with families in meaningful ways and for families to feel comfortable in the school and at school functions. Additionally, by creating culturally relevant and sustaining lessons, students are more likely to connect deeply and meaningfully with the learning experiences when they see themselves in the materials and topics they are learning.

To implement culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies within the partnership, it was essential for both the school's educators and the university faculty to honor and engage with the surrounding community, recognizing the integral role it plays in the students' lives. Everyone involved in the partnership first needed to understand the cultural assets and wealth that students brought from their lived experiences and communities (Cavanaugh *et al.*, 2017; Goldenberg, 2013; Moll & González, 1994; Rooney, 2017; Yosso, 2005). This knowledge is constantly being developed, often outside the traditional school day, and plays a crucial role in students' learning. Moll and González (1994) discussed the importance of embracing cultural funds of knowledge, acknowledging that:

It is primarily through these social networks that family members obtain or share what we have termed "funds of knowledge"... [defining] funds of knowledge as those historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being. (p. 443)

This focus on ensuring that students' community and the knowledge they bring into the classroom from that community was reinforced by Gutiérrez (2008), who argued, "The curriculum and its pedagogy, then, are grounded in the historical and current particulars of students' everyday lives, while at the same time orientated toward an imagined but possible future" (p. 154). Accessing and highlighting the cultural wealth that students bring daily to their classrooms and embedding that knowledge into their classroom learning can provide students with the desire and motivation to learn the classroom content.

Changing the way we approach university-school partnerships

While culturally relevant and sustaining materials and pedagogical practices have been widely discussed in PK-12 settings, there is still a need for further development and expansion regarding their application within university-school partnerships. In previous work, [Burgard and Jozwiak \(2020\)](#) discussed the importance of all university-school partnerships beginning with a culturally relevant lens and the faculties that make up the university's need to fully understand and embrace the communities with which they intend to partner.

Using the framework of culturally relevant/responsive and sustaining pedagogy and continuing to focus on understanding the importance of cultural assets and tapping into cultural funds of knowledge of the families and communities, university faculties [decide] to approach their partnerships differently. They would first begin every conversation by focusing on the P-12 students, their families, the school campus environment, and the larger local community. Then, the partners would work collaboratively to ensure that the community needs were identified, addressed, and met through the partnership while simultaneously providing benefits to the university, creating a mutually beneficial, reciprocal, sustaining partnership. ([Burgard & Jozwiak, 2020](#), p. 9)

This relationship and trust-building takes time and commitment. It is also based on the principle that the university faculty build relationships of solidarity with the students, staff, and community, demonstrating genuine care for the issues these communities face ([Boucher, 2020](#)). Engaging in approach and centering the community also challenges the traditional top-down model typical of most university-school partnerships ([Smith & Helfenbein, 2009](#); [Walsh & Backe, 2013](#)), where universities gain access to PK-12 schools to conduct research and experiment with new teaching models, while the schools themselves often receive little benefit—aside from materials and resources that, in many cases, they neither requested nor needed. In this style of university-school partnership, the university faculty who engage with the partnership do so at a distance and view the schools as spaces to collect research with opportunities to conduct studies leading to publications ([Walsh & Backe, 2013](#)) and not spaces for mutual and reciprocal learning and educational cooperation. [Walsh and Backe \(2013\)](#) further explain:

Universities have typically been experienced by schools and other community institutions as either closed and insular or oriented only to their own needs, engaging in what has come to be known as “drive-by” research. (p. 600)

Examining the challenges and shortcomings of past university-school partnerships while refocusing them to prioritize students, families, and the community could lead to meaningful change and significantly improve trust between local schools and universities ([Burton & Greher, 2007](#); [Ledoux & McHenry, 2008](#); [Waitoller, 2013](#); [Waitoller & Artiles, 2016](#); [Walsh & Backe, 2013](#)).

Given the extensive research on university-school partnerships, from the original Dewian laboratory schools ([Mayhew & Edwards, 2017](#); [Fallace & Fantozzi, 2017](#)) through the era of the PDS school model ([Darling-Hammond, 2005](#); [Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005](#)), and our own experiences participating in university-school partnerships at our previous institutions, we sought a different way to create culturally sustaining collaborations. Our focus from the onset was to have the university build a true partnership with the school – one that attempted to flatten the hierarchical nature so often present in these relationships and build a community of trust where all individuals were invested in the school's success. What transpired fulfilled that mission somewhat, but fell short in other ways.

This partnership stands out as an effort to reform a school and serve as a model for innovation rather than focusing on a specific curriculum area or functioning as a traditional lab school ([Burton & Greher, 2007](#); [Durnan, 2016](#)). It was not explicitly designed as a site for teacher candidates to complete their clinical teaching ([Farrell, 2021](#); [Resch et al., 2022](#)). Instead, its purpose was to implement best practices in teaching and learning in an environment where instruction often relied on oppressive and rote-based methods ([McClure, 2021](#); [Valenzuela, 2019](#)).

The journey to partnership

The partnership in this case study began during the 2019–2020 academic school year with conversations with district officials and administrators, classroom teachers, and some community members. The official SB 1882 partnership started the following Fall, at the beginning of the 2020–2021 academic year. The middle school campus houses grades 6–8 and is within one of the school districts that the university serves. Demographically, 98% of the students in the school self-identify as Hispanic, 1% as African American, and 1% as all other ethnicities, with the state designating that 94% of the student body as coming from an economically disadvantaged background. The school had received an unsatisfactory rating from the state education agency and was in danger of potential corrective action, including a takeover by the state. With that looming over them, the district investigated possible external partners that might embark on an SB 1882 partnership. District and campus administration approached leadership at the university to begin discussions about what such a partnership would look like.

The preliminary discussions broadened to involve faculty from the College of Education and Human Development who were dedicated to community-engaged work and had a strong commitment to, including several with direct prior experience with, university-school partnerships. This group of faculty met with teachers from the middle school, district officials, and community members and stakeholders during the fall of 2019. During that time, a plan for moving forward was developed. The partnership, if the district school board accepted the proposal, would be for the university partner to become the *operating partner* of the school and oversee the initiatives and programs designed to help the school. The agreement was that the partnership would focus on three areas: (1) redesigning the curricular and pedagogical choices at each grade level, (2) developing a teaming structure for each grade level, and (3) creating a new school discipline plan. The redesign of the curricular and pedagogical choices for instruction focused on culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, b, 2014; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017). This initiative aimed to make instructional practices more relevant to students' lives, fostering deeper connections to their daily experiences. By implementing a teaming structure, the school would build a more cohesive community where students would feel a strong sense of belonging within their teams and in the broader school environment. The partnership development team proposed a new disciplinary framework in response to high suspension and expulsion rates in previous years. They chose a model focused on restorative practices and activities designed to support students' social and emotional learning (SEL) development.

Culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), a term introduced by Ladson-Billings (1995a, b), is a framework designed to support the academic success of students from diverse cultural backgrounds while simultaneously affirming their cultural identity and fostering their critical consciousness. According to Ladson-Billings (1995a, b), CRP rests on three essential pillars: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Educators employing CRP hold high expectations for all students and design learning experiences that build on their strengths rather than focusing on perceived deficits (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, b). CRP acknowledges the value of students' cultural backgrounds and integrates their cultural knowledge, practices, and experiences into the curriculum.

Ladson-Billings argued that effective teachers help students navigate and honor their cultural identities while developing the skills needed to succeed (Ladson-Billings, 2022). A critical aspect of CRP is fostering students' awareness of and ability to critique societal inequities. Ladson-Billings (1995a, b) highlighted that culturally relevant educators encourage students to use their learning as a tool for social change, addressing injustice and oppression within their communities and beyond. CRP challenges traditional *color-blind* approaches to education by positioning students' cultural backgrounds as assets rather than obstacles.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) builds on the legacies of multicultural and culturally relevant pedagogy but shifts toward sustaining and revitalizing students' cultural practices and identities. Paris (2012) and Paris and Alim (2017) argued that CSP is essential, as education systems devalue marginalized communities. CSP aims to value and sustain students' cultural practices, foster critical consciousness, act as a site of resistance, and create schools committed to justice for students and communities (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017). CSP challenges educators to disrupt hegemonic practices in schools by recognizing and affirming the value of marginalized cultural practices. For instance, it emphasizes the importance of using students' home languages (e.g. African American Vernacular English, translanguaging, and Bilingual discourse practices) as assets rather than deficits in learning. By centering historically marginalized communities, CSP supports educational practices that sustain and expand students' cultural repertoires in ways that promote equity and justice.

A rocky beginning

The district officially approved the proposal in January 2020, and the following month, in February 2020, we had our first meeting with the entire school staff, parents, and students at the school. The parents who attended seemed interested and excited about the new organizational design of the school and the possibilities that having a university partner could bring to the school. They were most appreciative that the namesake of the school, named after a local community leader, stayed the same. The students did not seem to fully grasp the concept of having a university partner and were unsure how, if at all, this would change their educational experience. They were most concerned about issues that most middle school students are concerned about, like the cell phone and backpack policies. Most of the teachers in that meeting were excited about the possibilities of this partnership, specifically about having university experts with whom they could collaborate.

Some teachers, however, were understandably more dubious. A few were concerned about implementation and wondered who their *actual boss* was, the district or the university. Another concern was the possible lack of power in school decision-making. They were concerned that a partner would come into their school and change things without consulting them. A few staff members commented that they had seen this type of initiative before when universities came into schools bringing money and electronics and then left with nothing changed. Overall, that initial roll-out meeting was positive, with all those in attendance feeling they understood the new partnership and what the next academic year would look like.

From that initial roll-out meeting to the beginning of the next academic year, the world was immersed in addressing the global COVID-19 pandemic. The university faculty delivered the professional development and teacher coaching training we had planned just one month before the school year started. This training took place with everyone wearing masks, practicing social distancing in small breakout rooms of 10–12 people, and grappling with anxiety about the upcoming year. While starting the 2020–2021 school year was challenging for schools nationwide, our partnership faced additional complexity. The university, now the operating partner, needed to establish safety and teaching protocols for a learning environment we had never imagined when we wrote our proposal, along with our district partner.

There were decisions about moving the entire school to an online learning platform, which also came with challenges. The school is a high-needs, high-poverty, underserved school, so many families could not access reliable Wi-Fi, and the children did not have digital devices. Then, when the district decided to have the students return full-time, we needed to work with the district to develop our reentry plan. The beginning of the 2021 school year saw the teachers facing a hybrid teaching model where some students attended in person and others attended virtually, with the teacher instructing all of them simultaneously. The university faculty provided some mentorship and teaching during these first two years of the partnership. Still, the district and the university personnel responsible for managing the school were far more

concerned about student and teacher safety than whether we could provide all the promises we made in our SB 1882 proposal, and rightfully so. Teachers experienced immeasurable stress, managing both online and in-person students amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, with no vaccine available and masking becoming a contentious issue. Tragically, one of our teachers passed away from COVID-19 shortly after the school reopened. The unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted our partnership's ability to implement the SB 1882 proposal as planned. With shifting priorities towards ensuring safety and adapting to rapidly changing circumstances, the focus inevitably shifted from initial goals to immediate concerns.

As we entered the 2024–2025 academic year, the fifth year of our partnership, the state assessed the collaboration's effectiveness and the school's overall performance. This year was crucial for both the university and the school district as they evaluate whether the partnership remains viable and worth the continued effort and commitment. The current partnership agreement is for ten years, but ultimately, the future of the partnership hinges on these evaluations. For now, this case study offers valuable insights into what such a partnership can look like and how it can be effectively implemented.

Design method

As previously stated, in 2019, our regional university in South Central Texas initiated a collaborative partnership with three schools within a local district. This collaboration was facilitated by significant state legislation that reimagined partnerships between school districts and higher education. This critical ethnographic case study (Carspecken, 1996; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stake, 1995) focuses on one of the partner schools, a middle school that had received low ratings by the state before engaging with the university and was in danger of going into state receivership. The data presented here is part of a study from one school as part of an ongoing multi-year effort by a small group of education professors at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), along with a newly created institute developed to support underserved students and build staff capacity in schools designated as *failing* by the state of Texas (TASB, 2023).

As researchers and education professors committed to culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies, we understand that the designations and testing regimen in Texas are politically motivated, racialized, and biased against communities of color (Patt, 2022). Texas has a long history of oppressing its Latino communities, from Juan Crow laws to school segregation that continued into the 1980s (Gamboa, 2018; Harvard GSE, 2000; Texasarchive.org). We also realize that the schools and the teachers in the system face genuine and detrimental consequences for low school grades (Charles Butt Foundation, 2022, 2024; De Leon & Calvert, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2021; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017; Valenzuela, 2019). Therefore, to do solidarity work in Texas schools, researchers must balance their commitments to disrupt and subvert the system that discriminates and dehumanizes teachers and students with the need to aid schools and communities in educating children within the existing system (Boucher, 2020).

The authors have been involved since the school partnership's inception in 2019. They have worked with all of the teachers and administrators in the school in some capacity, and specifically with individual teachers and grade levels as needed throughout the past four years. They have provided group and individual professional development and mentorship at different levels depending on the school and the person's needs, and they have participated in school activities and community events. The two teachers in this study exemplify the best of the partnership, having been involved since its inception and possessing the deepest knowledge of the theories and practices the partnership aimed to implement in the school.

Critical ethnography

This study used a critical ethnographic method (Anderson, 1989; Carspecken, 1996; Lather, 1986; Madison, 2020; McGranahan, 2018). Thomas (1993) referred to critical ethnography as a metaphor that “conveys a particular social imaginary” (p. 20). McGranahan (2018) agreed and argued:

Ethnography is not just a method. In anthropology, ethnography is both something to know and a way of knowing. We use it as a method, a theory, and a style of writing. Informing each of these is an ethnographic sensibility, or a sense of the ethnographic as the lived expectations, complexities, contradictions, possibilities, and grounds of any given cultural group. (p. 1)

Critical researchers explain that they are not seeking objective truths that can be tested and abstracted. Instead, “any assertion will always be fallible” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 57). That fallibility makes critical qualitative research more reliable as critical researchers “are free to express the humanity of participants more fully” (Boucher, 2018, p. 210). Thomas (1993) explained that to think critically is to “unleash the researcher from the need to validate truth claims” and forgo the “domestication that comes from post-positivist objectivity” (p. 8). Madison (2020) described a “reflexive ethnography” in that the researchers hold themselves accountable for the research, abandoning the illusion of impartiality that creates barriers between the observer and the observed. This is especially important when the researchers are invested in the case’s success, as in our partnership work.

Sampling

This level of involvement makes an ethnographic approach the most conducive way to research the partnership’s effects on the school’s culture. While the overall project takes professors from the College of Education to several sites, this site has been the focus of most of the time and effort for Burgard and Boucher. Two teachers who have embraced the partnership were chosen for this article. Unfortunately, these two were not typical, but their narratives were instructive in helping us understand the motivations and experiences of high-performing teachers in the partnership.

Amara (pseudonym) was a Black male, former military, sixth-grade teacher in his 7th year of teaching. Lucia (pseudonym) was a Latinx female eighth-grade English teacher and also a mid-career teacher. Both were committed to the partnership and worked to develop courses and materials to meet the curricular and pedagogical goals as expressed in the vision for the partner school. Lucia obtained a master’s degree in administration during her time at the partner school and then left to work as a peer coach for the district. Amara explained that he was still weighing options but had the long-term goal of teaching in higher education after more time in the classroom.

Procedures

The two authors have spent the past four years building the partnership school, mentoring teachers, and offering professional development. Both participants were eager to share how the partnership had transformed their teaching practices and deepened their connection to the school. Upon receiving the *Informed Consent* and being assured anonymity, Lucia exclaimed, “I don’t want to be anonymous; this is important work! I want people to know I was a part of it.” However, we are still using pseudonyms and protecting the identity of the participants as prescribed by good practice and the University IRB.

Interviews were conducted during teachers’ prep periods without students. Each interview lasted approximately forty minutes, followed by a classroom observation lasting approximately ninety minutes. Student work and the general décor of the room were

photographed. The photos, interview recordings, transcripts, and field notes were de-identified before being stored on a secure server at the university (see: questions in [Appendix](#)).

Analysis

The two interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy against the original recordings. They were then coded for themes that were collapsed for this article to (1) cultural relevancy, (2) student empowerment, and (3) teacher empowerment.

Findings

These two successful classroom teachers have been involved from the start of the partnership and shared how it enabled them to be more culturally relevant than they could have been otherwise. Where the rest of the state is discouraging teachers from tackling tough conversations in their classrooms, the teachers at the partner school were encouraged to have students read and discuss books such as *Dear Martin* (Stone, 2018), *Dear Justyce* (Stone, 2022), *I am not your perfect Mexican daughter* (Sánchez, 2017), and *The hate U give* (Thomas, 2017) the same titles that are banned in several Texas school districts. These teachers fully embraced that freedom, using the books and assigning projects that explored communities of color and students' racial and cultural identities. Paradoxically, these lessons are discouraged in many districts across Texas, even South Texas, where schools are predominantly Latinx.

Cultural relevancy

The goals for the partnership include a deep understanding and use of Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017). For context, Texas has been a leader in the Anti-CRT movement that continues to stifle teachers from talking about race, slavery, segregation, or the legacy of colonialism in their classes, and Texas leads the nation in banning multicultural and gender content in classrooms (Lopez, 2022; Najjarro, 2022). More book bans have been at the district level than the state level, although the *1619 Project* has been specifically banned from Texas schools through state legislation (Jones, 2019; Powell, 2021; Schwartz, 2023). Because of contradictory and confusing laws, book bans have not been enforced in all districts, including the district where the partner school resides. Beyond that, as part of that partnership, books that were explicitly banned in other parts of Texas were specifically bought for teachers to use in the partner school. As eighth-grade English teacher Lucia explained, she used works that connected with her students but would have been unacceptable to districts with book bans.

I had [students] compare and contrast Tupac Shakur's *The Rose That Grew from Concrete* (1999) to *Mother to Son* (1922), by Langston Hughes. So, to me, they're going back in time, learning about a culture that's outside of their [experience] now. And then they were able to make that connection within their own knowledge of themselves and their lives in their world to *The Rose That Grew from Concrete* by Tupac Shakur. So, I do feel like I can defend these activities. I can take a little bit more because I have that shield to do that from [the partnership]. . . . And even using the *Dear Justice* or the *Dear Martin* books, those also fall under that same category.

Texas teachers are increasingly worried that complaints from lawmakers or activists could lead to job loss or even more severe consequences. Nationally, a 2023 survey by Merrimack College found that 35% of teachers plan to leave the profession within two years, and only 46% would encourage their younger selves to pursue teaching (Merrimack College, 2024). In Texas, the Charles Butt Foundation (2024) reported that 78% of teachers are considering leaving the profession, with only 16% feeling their work is valued by their communities, and 5% believe they have the support of elected officials (Charles Butt Foundation, 2024). However, partnerships with universities offer a layer of protection against the kind of political pressure that has driven many teachers in Texas to leave or drastically limit their curriculum.

Amara also pushed his sixth-grade students to a deeper understanding than the Texas curriculum would typically allow. Texas educational standards do not refer to the Civil Rights Movement in middle school (grades six through eight) and only mention it in a single standard for eleventh-grade U.S. history. The Texas standards generally present a white-centered narrative of Texas settlers' progress over a land that is alternately empty or savage, depending on the goal of the narrative (McClure, 2021; Valenzuela, 2019).

And right now, we're doing Civil Rights, and they're coming to me with their own little opinions. And it's kind of funny; they know a lot but don't know. So, as they sit here and talk and they're learning, you can see their eyes open up, like "dang, it really is like that, it was like that? I've been mean; I've been treating people wrong."

Amara extended his lessons to include the Civil Rights movement, incorporating the community where he taught and the struggle for civil rights in central Texas to the Border. He connected that to how students in his classroom treated each other and how they viewed their community. These things are frowned upon in Texas as testing anxiety demands strict adherence to a curriculum as defined by the STAAR test that feeds the ranking of schools. Amara has rejected the culture of test prep in favor of educating his students on issues that mattered to them and him. The university partnership allows him to explore beyond the narrow sixth-grade standards and create a collaborative and investigative classroom.

Student empowerment

Another goal of the partnership is to build the capacity of teachers to create lessons and curricula that engage students in high-quality, meaningful work. The ongoing crisis in Texas education persists as state leaders maintain policies and testing methods that have shown little change in results since 2000. In 2024, schools in Texas were funded at 47th out of the 50 states (Texas AFT, 2024), and in 2022, less than one-quarter of eighth graders were considered proficient in Math and Reading according to NAEP scores (NAEP, 2023). After redesigning the STAAR test in 2022, the 2024 results were similar. In 2024, 53% of Texas 3-8th grade students met or exceeded grade level expectations in English, and 41% met or exceeded expectations in Math (TEA, 2024). Therefore, in the design of the partnership, we envisioned a school where students were empowered to create meaning in their lessons and to go deeper than preparing for tests. Our vision was that the tests would take care of themselves if students and teachers wanted to be at school engaging in big ideas and delving into complicated concepts.

To meet his students' needs and the partnership's goals, Amara created a writing-centered classroom that incorporated art, music, and other learning modalities, all with the same goal: to empower and motivate his students. He recalled an important lesson about writing from his childhood:

It reminded me of my seventh-grade teacher when he said, "You can write," and I said, "I don't like to write." He said, "But can you think?" and I said, "Yes, I can think," and he said, "Then you can write."

This attitude pervaded Amara's teaching and is indicative of successful teachers in the partnership. He believes in his students' ability to direct their learning, a significant leap in Texas, where much of the curriculum emphasizes answering multiple-choice test questions. In the partnership, Burgard and Boucher have worked with teachers to help them move from a testing mentality to a learning-centered pedagogy in which students think critically about Texas and their position as Texans.

In her lessons on *Dear Martin* (Stone, 2018) and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (Sánchez, 2017), eighth-grade teacher Lucia discussed the students' struggles with texts that would help them understand the literature. She incorporated data on how income is distributed throughout the U.S. and Texas. Then, she helped her students make connections between what they were reading, the data, and their own experiences and communities.

So, long story short, I'm very much about taking their blinders off. So, these two passages were informational texts on income distribution, the lack of, you know, the disparities. And so, they're reading a very adult-like concept with, you know, rigorous vocabulary. They were fearless about it like they could see the challenge, but they were ready for it. They took it on. Anyways, even though it was challenging for them they were able to comprehend about 70 to 80 percent of the material, which I thought was a big win. I encouraged them and told them, "Yes, I'm allowed to challenge you." "Yes. This is a big ask for you to read, but I'm allowed to challenge you. . . ." And I also believe that if I push you up here and STAAR is over here, when you get to STAAR, you're going to be like, that's it? That's all you brought!? That was it? Like, that's how I want you to feel.

Lucia's responses feed into the discussion of empowering students because of the partnership. Teachers are encouraged by the university partners to use data, narratives, and texts that are not readily available to Texas teachers and are even discouraged. Her statement, "I am allowed to challenge you," results from numerous staff developments presented by Burgard and Boucher as well as her participation in her own graduate studies where she was completing the principal certification program at the partner university. It shows that she understood that empowering students to go beyond the narrow TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skill), the state standards in English, is not something teachers are accustomed to, nor something that comes easily. However, it is precisely what we hoped would happen when we entered the partnership, that these teachers would be empowered to become the type of teacher they dreamed they would be when they first went to college.

The project's results even surprised Lucia. She divided the class into two groups and gave them tools to analyze the data by annotating the themes and trends.

And I was shocked at the collaboration. I was shocked at the engagement, the competitiveness, the discussions. They were just rich. The support that they were finding to defend their own annotations, to defend their own thinking and their own understanding, going back to the text and saying, "No, this is why I put this because of this, it says right here." It was just, it was gorgeous. I was just, I was so proud because as scared as my students were to take it on, literally when I said, set the clock, here we go, it's due at this time, they went straight to it. They were engaged in communicating.

This level of engagement encompasses many of the partnership's goals, such as working to build capacity in teachers and administrators to create educational experiences that engage students in deep and intellectual pursuits. This stands in contrast to Texas schools, which primarily emphasize A or B ratings based on STAAR scores (Goodwin & Darwiche, 2024). The partnership, however, strives to create schools where students are eager to attend and fully engage in their education. Although this remains an ongoing effort, losing Lucia to a district-level position just as she had gained confidence in her students is a setback for both the partnership and the school's goals.

Amara also worked to engage his sixth-grade students in high-level work that excited and motivated them to think at higher levels.

But that's why I see when they come, and they sit right here, and they come and talk to me about each phase of study because, after each phase, they have to do a little writing piece. Sometimes, it's off their own words, sometimes it's prompted, but then they fill in the gaps based on what the focus is. . . . So that's where I see the biggest area of growth is when they come and articulate themselves; when I see them interact with each other better.

Sixth-graders live and work in a liminal area between childhood and adulthood in ways that make them much theorized about but seldom researched (Eccles, 1999; Martorano, 1977). Amara's academic discussion, writing, and collaboration tools have created a classroom that challenges students to look at the nation's histories and their communities with new understanding and appreciation. Beyond that, they learned to work together to meet goals and expectations created for themselves and define good work based not on the state's minimum goals but on much higher goals that matter to them.

Teacher empowerment

An essential aspect of the work of the partnership is empowering teachers to become the educators they want to be. This involves supporting their classroom skill development through coaching and professional development while also helping them advance by earning master's degrees and certifications, preparing them for leadership roles within both the school and the district. University faculty have worked to create opportunities for teachers at the partner schools with new university programs in Leadership, Special Education, and Curriculum and Instruction. However, the results of that effort have not yielded the numbers we were hoping for. There is no financial incentive for Texas teachers to gain higher degrees. Texas has no collective bargaining, so the unions are not strong enough to pressure districts to raise teachers' salaries to become more knowledgeable in pedagogy or curriculum. Through the SB 1882 partnership, districts have developed some economic incentives combined with federal grants that have lowered costs. However, these incentives seldom extend to increased salaries unless teachers move out of the classrooms and into administrative roles.

We worked with teachers on the school level to help them branch out and take risks with their curriculum and pedagogy. Lucia explained what the partnership meant to her teaching in the classroom.

[The partnership] put me in a position where I have to demonstrate. I'm not asking [the students] to do something I wouldn't be able to do because I try to teach my class as a community. Like, hey, sometimes I don't know it. "Guys, help Ms. Lucia out", you know. Or sometimes I challenge them, and I'll tell them, "okay, you have Google right in front of you on your laptops, you know, look it up, teach me, go research it, you have a question, ask your best friend, Google."

In professional development, Burgard and Boucher emphasized that teaching is not about possessing complete knowledge of a subject and conveying it to students but rather about guiding students through educational experiences that help them learn about the topic, themselves, and their communities. Lucia further explained.

I think [the partnership] also forces me to stretch my own learning and my own thinking. So, while it makes me a leader, an academic leader within the classroom, I try not to take the lead so much because I want them to take ownership of their own learning, but it does put me in a position where if I'm going to teach them to do it, I want to make sure that I try it first.

Lucia took advantage of incentives to gain a master's degree in Educational Leadership and her principal certification. These experiences made her a better classroom teacher, and now, at the district level, they will be useful in coaching teachers.

As an educator, [the partnership] has reinvigorated my sense of wanting to teach and why I do what I do. Because I remember being in college and taking remedial courses and I thought, I'm smart, but why? But I was always behind the curve on the learning game and study skills. So, once I learned some study skills, it was like, whoa, whoa, whoa, I can learn really quick. You see, and I'm just looking at the data, the ones doing it, their growth is exponential. They can write, they can think, they can talk with purpose.

Lucia's experience with the partnership was leveraged into personal, professional, and career advancement. She aims to become a teacher educator and make a difference in her community by doing the kind of work the university does through these partnerships.

Amara's experience has also been liberating. He explained how the partnership fostered an environment that empowers teachers to mentor students, previously underserved by the Texas educational system, into successful learners in his classroom.

I mean, it goes back to that freedom I create, and I can take myself out of myself, look at the data, and ask questions like, "Why are some students not doing the work?" "Why are some students doing the work?" "The ones who are doing the work, how can I get you to be stronger?" "The ones who aren't doing the work, what can I do for you?" Like I feel, I feel like the scholar that was always there when I was a child actually is coming out now.

Amara's statement resonates with us deeply. Both participants felt that the partnership allowed them to work as experts and scholars in the classroom. These feelings are not insignificant, especially as the Texas curriculum becomes more prescriptive (Puentes, 2023; Rauf, 2024). For these two participants, the partnership empowered teachers to enhance their skills, earn advanced degrees, and take on leadership roles within the school and district.

Pressures from the district and the state

One challenge we faced in the partnership, and a pressure that continued to linger in the background of nearly every conversation we had with several of Lucia and Amara's colleagues throughout the building, was the pressure they felt from the district and the state to raise their school letter rating. As mentioned earlier, the university and the school entered this partnership when the school received a non-passing grade from the state. However, during the 2021–2022 academic year (the most recent year of data found on the TEA website and when the university faculty were most present and involved in the school), the school campus received a "C" rating. Even with that jump in their state rating, the teachers still expressed a tremendous amount of stress to increase the school rating even higher, setting a goal of achieving a "B" campus and the stress of ensuring their students performed well on their state-mandated grade-level exams.

This pressure from the district and the state seemed to overshadow the creativity and innovation that a partnership like ours could offer. Often, when we suggest revamping their lessons or changing a selected reading to make the lesson more culturally relevant and engaging to the students, the response would be, "Can we do that? The district curriculum guide says we have to use this. Will my students be behind the other middle school campuses?" This further illustrates how significant Lucia's reading choices were in creating a culturally relevant classroom for her students and genuinely embracing the ethos of the partnership. When talking with, coaching, and mentoring the teachers, we found that they acknowledged the curriculum was white-washed, did not reflect the lived experience of the students they taught, and did not honor the community in which the school resides.

Whitewashing refers to curricula or educational material that has been stripped of diverse, multicultural perspectives and is predominantly centered on white, Eurocentric norms, values, and experiences (Boucher, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017). This is operationalized through district and state mandates enforcing a standardized curriculum that prioritizes conformity over cultural relevance and inclusivity, leading teachers to feel constrained and unable to adapt lessons to better engage and represent their students. This results in a lack of representation of the lived experiences, histories, and cultures of the majority of American students (NCES, 2024; Musu-Gillette *et al.*, 2017). The term whitewashing underscores how the curriculum fails to reflect or honor the diversity of the student body and the community it serves, reinforcing systemic inequities in education (Paris & Alim, 2017). This occurs even in districts like the one where the partnership resides, despite having an overwhelming population of Latino students and teachers.

However, they were hesitant to veer away from it. There was a continual reticence among many teachers to modify or alter the district-provided curriculum, even if that modification would make it more culturally relevant and engaging for their students. Adding to the teachers' apprehensions, during the four years of the partnership's existence, the Texas state legislature passed several laws and other state guidelines to remove or significantly limit multicultural content in the classroom, making it even more challenging for teachers to engage in this work. This led to many teachers agreeing with the need for culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies, even going so far as championing it in educational discussions during professional development days, but not enacting it in the classroom because of external pressures they felt they could not overcome.

The findings from the study illustrate the profound impact that university-school partnerships can have on teachers, their students, and the entire school. When enacted with

commitment from both partners, these collaborations can yield positive and perhaps even career-altering results, as seen with the two participants. However, our experience with this project illuminates Texas teachers' struggle in a system structured to silence their voices and identities. Even when teachers were empowered to make their own new and unique curricular and pedagogical choices and create more culturally relevant classrooms, some were hesitant to do so for fear of not adhering to a scripted curricular map that the district had designated directly related to state performance tests. Teachers who genuinely believed in the partnership and all the creative and innovative opportunities and possibilities it provided were still hesitant to break away from a structure they were accustomed to and reverted to what was familiar.

Originality/value

While the findings presented here are based on a single school as part of a larger project and ethnographic case study, this article adds to the extant body of research on university-school partnerships (Burgard & Jozwiak, 2020; Burton & Greher, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005; Harkavy *et al.*, 2013; Jones *et al.*, 2022; Jozwiak & Vera, 2016; Kimiecik *et al.*, 2022; Ledoux & McHenry, 2008; Leonard *et al.*, 2004; Levine, 2002). Most significantly, this study illuminates the state's impact in fostering and encouraging the creation of such partnerships. When universities and schools engage in collaboration, it is often done with federal grant funding that one or both entities receive and do so without any further financial support. In the case of our partnership, because of the SB 1882 legislation, we established a long-term, ten-year relationship instead of the short-term economic boost that comes from grant funding. This long-term commitment lends itself to relationship and trust-building with the school and solidarity with the community. The recent literature around partnerships often focuses on Professional Development Schools (PDS) (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005) that emphasize teacher preparation or research collaborations between universities and schools (Ledoux & McHenry, 2008; Leonard *et al.*, 2004; Levine, 2002). This study comes out of efforts specifically to work in solidarity with the community to bring this school to a place where students and the community choose the school and recognize it as a robust place of learning (Boucher, 2020).

Additionally, this study adds value to the current literature because it describes teachers' empowerment during a university-school partnership that affords them the freedom to be innovative and imaginative. Lastly, because we focused the partnership specifically around culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies, this study provides a vehicle to hear from the teachers who committed to creating a classroom environment that reflected the students they teach even in the face of external opposition, such as the state limiting such work. The study demonstrates the impact this approach can have on teachers and students and the importance of having university faculty support that endeavor.

Conclusion

Senate Bill 1882 represents an effort to foster innovation and collaboration in education, creating opportunities for schools to partner with external entities to reimagine their educational models. However, its implementation reveals systemic challenges, particularly forging partnerships with Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs). While the potential of these collaborations is evident, as highlighted in our case study, the barriers, including limited uptake, resistance to culturally sustaining practices, and external pressures, underscore the difficulties of realizing the program's vision on a broad scale.

Our study of a university-school partnership highlights the transformative possibilities when culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies serve as the guiding framework. By placing students' cultural identities and linguistic assets at the forefront, the partnership sought to create a dynamic, inclusive learning environment that aligned with the goals of SB 1882.

However, the partnership faced significant obstacles: state accountability mandates, rigid curricular structures, and systemic resistance to innovative teaching practices. These challenges often stifle the creativity and autonomy to implement equitable and transformative educational reforms.

This case study offers valuable lessons for navigating the complexities of initiatives like SB 1882. First, it underscores the importance of systemic change at the policy level. To empower partnerships between schools and universities, state accountability systems must shift from punitive measures toward frameworks that encourage experimentation, innovation, and equity. Without such systemic support, even the most promising partnerships will struggle to thrive under external pressures.

Second, the study emphasizes the critical role of culturally sustaining pedagogies in achieving meaningful educational transformation. These pedagogies honor students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and provide a foundation for deeper engagement, improved academic outcomes, and stronger community connections. To realize SB 1882's full potential, educational stakeholders must prioritize and normalize such approaches, fostering environments where they can flourish without fear of political backlash or bureaucracy.

Lastly, the findings highlight the need to reimagine the nature of university-school partnerships. Genuine collaboration must be rooted in mutual respect, shared goals, and reciprocal benefits. Unlike traditional models, where universities primarily used schools as sites for research with little tangible benefit for the schools themselves, partnerships must prioritize building trust and co-creating solutions that benefit both institutions and the communities they serve.

This work remains ongoing and evolving as the partnership adapts to new mandates, leadership changes, and the unique energy and perspectives of each incoming cohort of students. Despite the pressures of accountability systems, this partnership provides a roadmap for navigating the tensions between innovation and systemic constraints. For future partnerships to succeed, we must address these tensions, empowering educators and communities to resist inauthentic practices and embrace culturally relevant and creative educational solutions.

Ultimately, the lessons drawn from this partnership serve as a powerful reminder of what is possible when schools and universities come together with a shared commitment to equity, innovation, and cultural sustainability. By addressing the systemic barriers that hinder progress, university school partnerships like this one have the potential to inspire schools to center the needs and identities of students, teachers, and communities.

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Appendix

Interview questions

Ethnography of a middle school university-school partnership

- (1) Please tell me/us about how you feel the class went during the observation period.
- (2) Were there any specific interactions with students that you felt were significant or that were part of any changes in your relationship with any students?
- (3) What kinds of interactions do you value most with your students?
- (4) What interactions during the observation period led to greater student engagement?
- (5) What is your philosophy or what are your general ideas about how to engage students?
- (6) How do you feel your students are engaging with school and your class?
- (7) How do you feel that things have changed since the University partnership started?
- (8) How has the curriculum changed since the University partnership started?
- (9) What changes do you see in the student body since the University partnership started?
- (10) What changes do you see in the way the school is run since the University partnership started?

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