

Following the development of school-based teacher educators: pathways to professional agency

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Abstract

Purpose – Examining school-based teacher educator development in a specific context, we highlighted the position of p-12 school-based teacher educators and their development over time and positionality.

Design/methodology/approach – Through phenomenological case study of these p-12 school-based teacher educators, we identified influences on school-based teacher educators where these clinical teacher educators moved from reliance on support structures to leading within these structures.

Findings – Participants identified points contributing to their growth as teachers, teacher educators and their development of professional agency in their roles as school-based teacher educators. Mentoring first, co-liaising and trusting relationships were key to their development.

Research limitations/implications – Inquiring into key influences affecting the development of p-12 school-based teacher educators, we found that structured mentoring through multiple roles in clinical teacher education supported their evolution as leaders of clinical practice in teacher education within their p-12 school sites and at the university.

Originality/value – The position of Liaison-in-Residence is highly unique in School-University Partnerships; thus examining their development is significant to the context of S-UPs.

Keywords School-based teacher educators, Professional learning, Clinical supervision

Paper type Research article

Introduction and purpose: studying school-based teacher educators

Intentional school-university partnerships (S-UP) have been shown to be clinically rich teacher preparation contexts (Burns *et al.*, 2015; Jacobs & Burns, 2021), meriting further exploration for teacher educator development. Clinical practice involving partnerships among schools and universities remains a key context for powerful teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Highlighting clinical practice in teacher education draws attention to the professional development of teacher educators who work in these spaces. Scholars have begun to investigate frameworks for the preparation and professional development of teacher educators (Carter *et al.*, 2019; Snow *et al.*, 2020; Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013; Jacobs *et al.*, 2015; Kosnick *et al.*, 2011; Loughran, 2014). Some scholars have explored the development of a pedagogy or knowledge base of teacher education (see, for example, Grossman, 2018; Henning *et al.*, 2018; Hollins, 2015; Vanassche *et al.*, 2015; Yendol-Hoppey *et al.*, 2019). Other scholars have focused on what teacher educators do in order to uncover insights into how they may be prepared or develop over time (Snow *et al.*, 2020). Reviewing the work of teacher educators highlighted specific functions connected to their work, including design, leadership and advocacy (Snow *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, Burns *et al.* (2015) investigated scholarship on teacher candidate supervision and developed a “framework for naming the scope and nature of teacher candidate supervision in clinically based teacher preparation” (p. 217). This framework identified tasks, high-leverage practices, and pedagogical routines to

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name the work of supervision. Having this shared framework allows for a foundation for the development of teacher educators engaging in the practice of clinical supervision (Burns *et al.*, 2015). Scholarship has also examined successful structures for teacher educator development within communities of shared practice, including practitioner inquiry (Jacobs *et al.*, 2015), self-study communities of practice (Gallagher *et al.*, 2011) or through graduate seminars (Butler *et al.*, 2014). Highlighting clinical practice as a space for teacher educator development also leads to the importance of investigating the positions of school-based teacher educators within S-UPs.

In this study's exploration of teacher educator professional development, we identified mentor teachers to teacher candidates in our programs as key to powerful teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2006) and established an enhanced p-12 school-based teacher educator role: Liaison-in-residence. Liaisons-in-Residence (LiRs) are full-time classroom teachers who also serve as clinical supervisors in school-university partnerships (Snow *et al.*, 2018). They provide seminars for teacher candidates in their buildings and support mentor teachers (their peers) in their work. When they take on the role of LiR, they share responsibility for teacher candidate development and evaluation with a university-based liaison in a co-supervision model. They negotiate multiple relationships in this complex, hybrid space and must span boundaries (Akkerman & Bakkar, 2011) between school-based colleagues, teacher candidates, principals and the university liaison. The LiR role will be more fully described in the methods section of this article.

This system of clinical supervision evolved over time (Carter *et al.*, 2019) and has become a key aspect of quality in our teacher education programs. Having a liaison embedded in p-12 school sites provides insider support for the development of teacher candidates as well as stronger partnerships toward teacher education performance outcomes. We honor the development of teacher educators (Snow *et al.*, 2020; Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013; Vanassche *et al.*, 2015) through a specific focus on a professional continuum with multiple roles and positions (Snow & Jacobs, 2026), including the development of p-12 school-based teacher educators. Therefore, we engaged in a phenomenological case study (Merriam, 1998) of the experiences of these p-12 school-based teacher educators, LiRs, to explore the following questions: What were the key influences on the development of LiR? In what ways did the role of LiR inform their sense of professional agency and leadership?

Theoretical framework

The complex, layered work of teaching and teacher education in clinical practice involves hybrid spaces or contexts for engaging in this work. These spaces are often developed as networks built on relationships and spanning boundaries of these spaces (Martin *et al.*, 2011; Lynch *et al.*, 2025). Lynch *et al.* (2025) note the importance of generative learning in a "third space" context and how clinical practice spaces in teacher education frame this learning. Boundary crossing work of teacher educators includes negotiating the boundaries from each side of the institutional system (Akkerman & Bakkar, 2011; Christopherson *et al.*, 2024). Prior studies have focused on the experiences of university-based teacher educators (Snow *et al.*, 2020; Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013; Vanassche *et al.*, 2015) in these hybrid spaces or amplifying the voices of p-12 educators in clinical practice (Snow-Geron, 2009). Our current study blurs the boundaries even further by emphasizing the specific position of p-12 school-based teacher educators serving as clinical supervisors and mentor teachers within their p-12 classrooms and school buildings. They have institutional positionality in both p-12 schools and universities as an LiR, making their boundary-crossing even more complex and multi-dimensional.

Boundary-crossing and teacher leadership

Boundary crossing also included LiRs as teacher leaders. The participants in this study engaged in new roles for both contexts (school and university) where they practiced. They emerged as

teacher leaders with a focus on coaching – both their peers as mentor teachers and preservice teachers. Teacher leadership is a complex issue that has a limited conceptualization as a field (Butler *et al.*, 2025). Teacher leadership is often considered through either formal or informal roles and has resisted definition overall (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). This study crosses even the boundaries of teacher leadership conception (Butler *et al.*, 2025; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) as these school-based teacher educators do practice leadership outside their classrooms with a key responsibility to the university’s mission of preservice teacher development. In S-UPs, preservice teacher development is also a focus of schools, particularly with mentor teachers. However, the generative learning for partners in their school classrooms is typically supported by university partners. Even if this is a reciprocal space for learning to be actualized in university classrooms (e.g. methods course) and school classrooms (e.g. mentor development), the newly school-based teacher educator positioned as boundary spanner within their traditional school space adds new complexity to this “third space” (Lynch *et al.*, 2025).

Boundary spanning involves LiRs fulfilling diverse responsibilities like teacher leadership and instructional coaching, for example. Highlighting the learning of school-based teacher educators in the space of clinical supervision includes a focus on instructional coaching. Hunter and Redding (2023) suggest instructional coaching stems from the broader context of teacher leadership, in particular in the space of supporting peers. Unfortunately, the void in literature addressing the preparation of teacher leaders (Butler *et al.*, 2025) still exists; thus, reviewing the development of school-based teacher educators as teacher leaders and clinical supervisors is wholly unique. Burns *et al.* (2015) highlight the significance of school–university partnerships and clinical practice as a space for a “continuum of professional learning.” This continuum would include classroom teachers as mentor teachers and coaches and *also* clinical practice supervisors for preservice teachers. The shared agenda and collaboration are necessary for unique roles and responsibilities within a “third space” for teacher education (Lynch *et al.*, 2025).

Boundary-crossing and professional agency

Professional growth and development for liaisons in our context is also designed around communities of practice (Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Wenger, 1998). Participation in a community of practice supports teacher leaders (LiRs in this space) who are boundary spanners and participants in new ways of mentoring and leading. In these communities of practice, knowledge may be co-constructed and enacted practice may be interrogated through reflection and a focus on improvement. We share the perspective of Hökkä *et al.* (2012) that the development of professional agency is socially shared, culturally, historically and socially shaped, and provided through mediational means. Professional agency is not individually achieved, but negotiated in the context and through community. Such an understanding of identity development supports the focus on p-12 school-based teacher educators and their enacted practice. Fenton-O’Creavy *et al.* (2015) state, “as practitioners cross boundaries, move between different regimes of competence, and enact their multi-membership in different communities their identities are modulated in each new context” (p. 33). Therefore, a focus on teacher educator development from the perspective of a p-12 school-based teacher educator became the focus of this study.

Building on studies of the development of mentor teachers as school-based teacher educators (Henning *et al.*, 2018), we focused on an expanded role of school-based teacher educator as mentor *and* supervisor/liaison. As liaisons who serve as clinical supervisors of teacher candidates in “professional year” clinical experiences, we engage in multiple communities of practice and across collaboration networks. Such networks are influenced by professional agency through social relationships as well as guiding values within the network (Daly *et al.*, 2010; Moolenaar *et al.*, 2012). Social networks are often linked with social capital (Daly *et al.*, 2010), where “social capital is concerned with the resources that exist in social relationships (sometimes referred to as ‘ties’) between individuals as opposed to the resources

of a specific individual” (p. 364). Conducting the relational work of teacher educators across networks means professional agency is often informed by “schemata...embedded in communities and emerge and are maintained through interpersonal interactions” (Mohrman *et al.*, 2003, p. 321). The current study adds to the literature through its focus on the development of school-based teacher educators who serve as liaisons (clinical supervisors) in their school buildings *and* mentor teachers in their p-12 classrooms in our teacher education programs. The focus narrowed to the multiple networks and interactions of liaisons occurring within the university structures for support, while also acknowledging the hybrid contexts and boundary encounters (Kubiak *et al.*, 2015) in which liaisons engage. Therefore, when organizing communities of practice as sites of development for teachers and teacher educators, we had to consider the hybridity of the spaces they work in, as well as to create space and empower individuals to share the funds of knowledge that teacher educators bring from their multiple social networks and interactions.

Methods and data sources

In this phenomenological case study (Merriam, 1998), we explore the personal and collective narratives of three school-based teacher educators as they reflect on their growth from classroom teachers to mentor teachers and then to school-based university supervisors in their role as LiR (Snow *et al.*, 2018). In order to unearth the factors that influenced the development of these school-based teacher educators as they moved toward autonomy and agency in their roles, we invited three long-time LiRs to share the stories of their journeys.

These three school-based teacher educators all began their journey working in tandem with a university-based liaison to develop teacher candidates in their year-long clinical placements in three different Title 1 Community Schools. Title 1 Community Schools provide free breakfast and lunch as well as a full range of family services, such as free before and after-school programs, a food pantry, and a variety of medical and social services. These LiR's now have full responsibility and autonomy for nurturing the daily operations of the teacher education partnership in their building, including communication with the building principal, interviewing and placing teacher candidates with mentors, grading university assignments and conducting formative observations and evaluations of candidates.

To explore how working as a LiR may have influenced their development as teacher educators, we collected two overlapping data sources. These included individual historical personal narratives with predetermined prompts and one 30-min individual interview. We collected the historical written narratives via Google Docs. Participants were asked to respond to five prompts that were designed to provide a description of their journeys as educators from past to present roles and to identify what influenced their growth and decisions. To further elaborate on the written data, we conducted individual interviews with each participant using eight predetermined prompts. Room was left for probing participant responses and for participants to bring in additional responses unrelated to our prompts. These interviews were conducted and recorded using virtual meeting software. Transcripts were recorded verbatim.

During data analysis, we engaged in several rounds of cyclical coding (Saldaña, 2016). The first round consisted of individual line-by-line coding. We each kept notes regarding possible themes that were emerging. Next, we read each other's individual coding and notes and made notes where we noticed overlaps. For instance, we both noticed the mention of moving from mentoring into a leadership role. This began to emerge as a code across the historical narratives and interviews. As an example, Stella said in her historical narrative, “My enjoyment of working with...adult students had me looking for more of a leadership position.(Stella, HPN p. 1)” In our last two rounds of coding, we met face to face to collapse codes to determine initial findings through identifying themes connected to the evolution of different roles and experiences of LiRs. During this process, we were able to identify in the data the importance of leadership development through the co-liaison relationship and participation in liaison communities of practice. For instance, Stella followed the statement

above about wanting to be a leader with this description of her involvement with a LiR book club she joined after accepting the role of LiR. “This [the book club] helped me to navigate tough conversations between our teacher candidates, mentor teachers, who were also my colleagues, and myself” (Stella HPN p.2). The cyclical rounds of coding with discussion expanded the “role of leader” into a larger theme that revealed that experiences as a teacher and mentor teacher were not sufficient to prepare these new leaders to cross boundaries between their university liaison role and their already established role of peer to colleagues in their school setting.

Finally, we met once again to create individual cases for the three participants. We then looked across individual cases for cross-cutting themes and coded themes across cases into insights about the greatest influences on professional learning and the evolution of leadership and agency in their roles as school-based teacher educators.

To make analytic connections between theory and data, we carefully looked at each theme and made connections to the literature. For example, all candidates noted the importance of their co-liaising relationship with their university liaison as being influential in forming their professional identity. We connected responses like “We worked side-by-side for the first semester, allowing me to gain more courage in my role” (Stella HPN p.2) and “I was recruited by a university liaison and partnered with her for four years while I gained capacity and agency” (Ross, HPN p. 1) with Hökkä *et al.*'s (2012) work that highlights the importance of trusting social relationships and shared mediation for building professional agency. We continued this analysis across themes to increase the trustworthiness of the findings.

Liaison-in-residence: situating the context

In our university teacher preparation program, we value the role of the liaison (clinical supervisors) as a cornerstone to quality teacher preparation. We have both university-based liaisons - full-time faculty and part-time adjuncts - as well as school-based liaisons, whom we call LiRs. These school-based, clinical educators are full-time teachers, instructional coaches, or occasionally, administrators who also work for the university, supervising preservice teachers during the professional year internship and student teaching placements. The professional year goes across the final year of the teacher preparation programs. The first semester, or intern semester, they are placed in a school, three full days a week, while finishing coursework. The second semester is five full days of clinical placement, called student teaching.

To provide space for the LiR to leave their classroom and work with preservice teacher candidates in the building, a strong teacher candidate is paired with a strong LiR who serves as a mentor teacher to the candidate in their classroom. This arrangement allows the LiR to leave the room periodically to conduct observations and engage in feedback cycles and goal-setting with the other teacher candidates in the building. At first, the candidates in the building are co-supervised by both the university- and school-based liaison. However, over time, the LiRs began to develop agency and autonomy over their work as a clinical supervisor/teacher educator and became a powerful bridge between the university and the school site. Each partnership site provided learning opportunities for growing the leadership skills and dispositions of these school-based clinical educators.

Participant learning context

The context and social networks in which each of these participants was embedded provided unique opportunities for professional learning within and between multiple communities of practice (Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Wenger, 1998). Interactions between these emerging teacher leaders and their diverse K-8 students, teacher candidates, building administrators as well as their multiple interactions with the university liaison, other liaisons, and their university professional learning communities merged to form a rich opportunity for spanning boundaries.

LiRs were boundary spanners who negotiated professional growth for teacher candidates (university students) within their school contexts and engaged in their own professional learning across university and school communities of practice to emerge as leaders who were positioned to support professional learning across spaces in the S-UP contexts (Lynch *et al.*, 2025).

In these sites, knowledge was co-constructed, and the enacted practices of both the LiR and university liaison could be interrogated through co-reflection with a focus on improvement. Such an understanding of identity development supports the focus on p-12 school-based teacher educators and their enacted practice. Fenton-O’Creevy *et al.* (2015) state, “as practitioners cross boundaries, move between different regimes of competence, and enact their multi-membership in different communities their identities are modulated in each new context” (p. 33). Therefore, a focus on teacher educator development from the perspective of a p-12 school-based teacher educator merited further inquiry. In the following sections, we describe participants within their contexts before moving into the findings from data.

Stella

Stella works in the largest district in our state. She began in 2004 as a classroom teacher in a middle school. She was asked to be a mentor teacher, and then helped to develop one of our university’s first professional development schools (PDS). Stella was invited to serve as a LiR as a pilot for this new model. Stella was partnered with a university liaison who had a strong background in PDS and teacher education. Eventually, Stella gained the knowledge, skills and agency to become the site coordinator on her own, where she and her principal continued to refine the partnership. Stella gained skills outside the scope of a classroom teacher by being involved in developing handbooks, mentoring professional learning, and co-constructing unique structures for the partnership. Stella returned to the university for a master’s degree in Educational Leadership. She is now the principal at an Elementary School in the same district. During this study, she was in her second year in this administrator role, and she continued to serve as a LiR, along with developing a LiR program at her school by personally mentoring two of her classroom teachers to become LiRs.

Ross

Ross works in a large district in an Elementary (Pre K-6th grade) school serving low-income and diverse students. This school site is the closest to the university, and they place a large number of teacher candidates from early field experiences to the final student teaching semester. He started his teaching journey in 2014 in a smaller district working with a low-income and linguistically diverse student population, and he participated in the university’s induction program across his first year of teaching. This induction program engaged new teachers in classroom observations and goal setting from familiar university liaisons, support in developing a unit of study with high-yield strategies, and an inquiry into their own student’s learning outcomes. Ross eventually moved closer to the city center and took a job teaching 6th grade for his current district in a dual language, title one community school and served as a mentor teacher for university teacher education students. Ross returned to the university for a graduate certificate in Mathematics Instruction, Learning, and Leadership. As Ross grew as a teacher leader in his building, he was asked to take on the role of LiR. He was recruited by a university liaison and partnered with her for four years while he gained capacity and agency. Each year that he partnered with the university liaison, he took on a new piece of teacher educator practice until he developed the knowledge and skills necessary to lead the partnership work independently. For example, after year one, Ross wanted to complete all his observations solo. In year two, he added the evaluations of all assignments and, in the end, he felt comfortable leading his own seminars and partnering with the principal to interview and make teacher candidate placements. Eventually, Ross grew into the role of a partnership site coordinator, where he worked closely with his building principal to develop the skills of new mentor teachers to create sustainability in his building.

Leah

Leah works in the same district as Ross and has served as an elementary school educator since 2007 in a low-income, linguistically diverse school setting. Leah's school hosts a large number of refugee and new-to-the-country students and their families with multiple languages spoken. Leah started as a classroom teacher in a school that has had a long-standing clinical partnership with the university. She became a mentor teacher for the university's teacher candidates. Leah's skill as a teacher leader was soon recognized by school and university partners. For instance, Leah saw a need for academic support for elementary students at her school and partnered with the university to have teacher candidates serve as tutors. She later became a LiR.

As a LiR, Leah was partnered with the same university liaison as Stella. In this site, there was a strong relationship between the LiR, the principal and the university liaison. Through co-liaisoning with her university partner and leadership mentorship from her principal, Leah quickly developed the ability to engage in critical conversations with candidates and mentors, developed a school-wide view of the partnership activities (e.g. early field experiences and professional year experiences) and learned how to oversee building placements. With these new skills and a broader view of the purposes and workings of the school-university partnership, Leah was ready to be a partnership site coordinator. In 2022, Leah's talent for teacher leadership was recognized by district administration, and she was hired under a new strategic initiative as a district instructional coach.

Findings: liaisons-in-residence development stories

In their personal narratives and interviews, the participants identified points contributing to their growth as teachers, teacher educators and their development of professional agency along their professional journeys. What was it in these settings and their experiences that led to their growth as a school-based teacher educator? The findings sections will first describe each participant's individual story and then highlight the findings across participant experience. Shared components of school-based teacher educator development included mentoring as an entry point; the importance of a co-liaising model, and developing a learning space with trust and autonomy.

Stella's story

Stella credits her experience as a LiR with accelerating her development and professional agency as both a teacher and as a leader. She felt that mentoring teacher candidates renewed her love for teaching, and it pushed her to develop a deeper knowledge of teaching and learning, provided her with an opportunity to interrogate her own practice, and gave her a first step toward the development of leadership skills. Stella explains how her experience as a mentor started her on her road to a teacher leader:

Our university students helped me to elevate my teaching craft. Not only did I have to truly think about what, why and how I was teaching, but I also had to be able to explain the what, why and how. This experience gave me a new understanding of the need for teacher professionalism and education. This led me to become involved with our Professional Development School (PDS) team at my middle school. Our team worked to train mentor teachers to work with teacher candidates and to ensure our teacher candidates were given the best possible experience.

Stella's initial growth was influenced by her desire to support teacher candidates as a mentor teacher. She began to think of teacher development beyond herself and her classroom. She continued in her narrative:

Due to the high number of teacher candidates at our school, the university was looking for a partnership with a classroom teacher to help supervise candidates. My enjoyment of working with both young and adult students as well as looking for more of a leadership position, led me to the position of Liaison in Residence. This is a position I have carried with me throughout my educational journey (Stella PN, 2022, pp. 1-2).

As Stella moved from a mentor teacher to a coach, she was paired with an experienced university liaison and was invited to join a monthly liaison professional development professional learning community, the Teacher Education Liaison Group (TELG). The university liaison, who has been the main liaison for the university partnership and the building, and the new school-based teacher educator engaged in a co-supervision model or in this context, a co-liaison model. The success of this model is dependent on a relationship of mutual trust and transparency. The university liaison intentionally used a gradual release of scaffolding in order to develop autonomy within the school-based teacher educator over their practice and the school partnership. The LiR takes on full responsibility for the observations, providing feedback, leading the seminars and supporting mentor teachers in the building in pieces. This process is developmental and the time frame is negotiated between the liaison pairs. Stella articulated her experiences in the following way in her personal narrative:

As I moved from a mentor teacher to a liaison-in-residence, I was paired with a university liaison. She coached me through the expectations, observations, and teacher candidate seminars. We worked side-by-side for the first semester, allowing me to gain more courage in my role. During this time, I was also involved in a book study, *Crucial Conversations* by Patterson, Grenny, Switzler and McMillan, with other liaisons-in-residence and our university colleagues. This helped me to navigate tough conversations between our teacher candidates, the mentor teachers who were also my colleagues and myself (p. 2).

Stella's experience was built from her internal desire to learn more and become a teacher leader and was further developed in communities of practice, like TELG and her partnership with other LiRs and university-based liaisons.

After that first semester as a liaison, I always felt comfortable reaching out to university liaisons when I had questions. They guided me on questions such as: What do I do when a teacher candidate is not improving? How do I address a mentor teacher who is not allowing the teacher candidate enough teaching experiences? and so on. I also attended TELG meetings whenever possible to further my learning in guiding our teacher candidates toward success. As I continued in my role, I gradually gained more experiences and became more assertive and confident. For the last three years, I have been able to help guide other liaisons-in-residence toward independence (pp. 1-2).

The cycles of individual growth and influence on larger communities (like mentoring future LiRs) informed the development of LiRs as teacher leaders and school-based teacher educators.

Professional agency

Stella has come full circle in her development as a teacher leader. After earning her Master's in Educational leadership, she now has autonomy over her own school building. She continues to value the role of LiR for not only its affordance to continue to develop her own practice, but also the development of her staff and faculty. In her interview) Stella discussed how her experience as a mentor and a LiR helped her have a passion and the agency for leading a school that is focused "on being a learning school or a school that's always learning" (interview transcript, 2023, p. 5). She went on to say, "When I took on. . . teacher candidates it really made me increase my professionalism and when I watch that happen within classrooms as a liaison, and now as a principal, it shows me that our students are able to grow from that" (p. 5).

Stella's story highlights how the LiR role helped her develop the agency to take on leadership roles and to develop an identity as an educational leader. She shared:

I would like to gain more experiences and grow in my understanding of what it takes to be a trustworthy leader. Then, I would like to take my leadership skills to another area of education, which is to be determined.

My LiR role completely led me to my position today. By becoming a LiR, I was able to see myself as a leader. It provided an avenue for me to develop my leadership skills and gave me the confidence to first become an instructional coach and later, head back to get my graduate degree in Educational Leadership. I am grateful for the opportunity and would like to continue as a LiR in the future.

Figure 1 highlights Stella’s development as an LiR and her growth as a teacher/leader through her professional development as an LiR.

Ross’s story

Ross credits his experience as a LiR as being the most powerful professional development he has had in his career. During his interview, he explained that being embedded as a coach in his colleagues’ classrooms allowed him to shadow and see the threads that start in Kindergarten and move from grade to grade. He was able to step outside his own grade band and “understand the bigger picture” (interview transcript, 2023, p. 1). For Ross, being a LiR allowed him to see beyond his own classroom, beyond his grade level team to a broader view of curriculum and learning. He was able to further expand his education scope when collaborating with his university mentor.

Ross’s developmental journey has some similarities with Stella’s. They both highlight the mentoring relationship with the university-based liaison as a powerful space for their professional learning. Ross tells about his experience partnering and co-liaisoning with his university partner in his Personal Narrative survey responses:

The first three years I worked very closely with my university liaison and other staff at the university to learn the ins and outs of the program and how it should be run. I needed to learn the mechanical side of the program, the requirements that interns and student teachers need to meet during their professional year placement and the personal side of the program, how to look at placing a professional year teacher candidate and how to support them during their professional year (Ross PN, 2022).

Like Stella, Ross’s professional growth was also initiated by his own questions about structuring clinical field experiences for teacher candidates. He worked closely with his liaison mentor to explore his questions and further develop his understanding.

The staff at the university has been and continues to be my biggest support. They invested a lot of time and effort to train me in all the things I would need in order to be a liaison, (Danielson’s Framework for Teaching, Taskstream, formative observations and what to look for, how to do them, seminars, all resources needed). I spent my first year co-observing candidates with my university liaison and doing the debriefing meetings post-observation. She served as my mentor in all things liaison, much like the

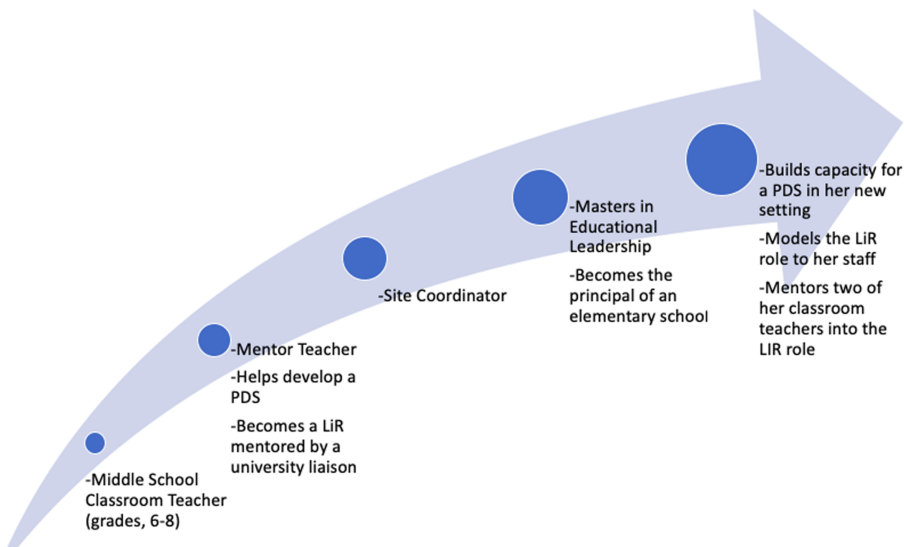


Figure 1. Stella’s developmental trajectory

relationship we hope to see between a mentor teacher and a teacher candidate. My university liaison allowed me to observe and participate in every aspect of the process for as long as I felt I needed before I was ready to run the program independently, and even after I fully took over I always know that she or any of the staff at [the university] is a phone call or an email away for support (Ross PN, 2022, pp. 1-2).

Ross's communities of practice relied more on individual mentoring and support from different leaders in his building and the school-university partnerships. Individual mentors were an important factor impacting Ross's ability to gain the professional agency necessary to successfully carry out his school-based teacher educator role. He gives credit to the principals in both his schools and the crucial role they played in his developing autonomy over his practice. To make this model work, the principal must exhibit trust in the LiR and be willing to create an autonomous space for the LiRs to lead and take responsibility for the partnership. This trust means the principal engages with the LiR in shared leadership around decision-making regarding the partnership. This would include interviewing and placing candidates with mentor teachers, problem-solving issues between mentors and candidates, creating growth plans for candidates not meeting benchmarks, and the recommendation to remove a candidate from their placement. Ross described the process in the following way in his narrative:

Over the next two years I slowly began to run most things independently (with the safety net of the university liaison always being available if I needed assistance). I now run the program at my elementary school (mostly) independently. I have had two very supportive administrators who supported me; however, I needed to make the program work best in the schools I have been in. For administrators I think they see the program and the presence of professional year candidates in the schools as a value added, so they were very willing to do the work to make it successful and to help build the profession we work in (Ross PN, 2022, p. 2).

Ross's individual curiosity about clinical partnerships and support from mentors to grow as a leader was founded in trusting relationships and shared community goals. His developmental trajectory initiated from within himself and expanded through his work with others for a shared goal of strong partnerships and teacher development over time.

Professional agency

In the end, Ross sees the relationships he developed as a student teacher with his liaison and the current relationships he has formed with his university liaison as a reciprocal model for his relationships with his teacher candidates. What was modeled for him in his own learning experiences, he could now turn around and model for his teacher candidates. He admitted hoping that they in turn could take this mentoring stance into their own teaching careers. Ross's work with the university induction program further solidified the importance of generational support in teacher and teacher educator development. Ross has had the opportunity to follow his teacher candidates into their practice and continue his relationships with them as first- and second-year teachers. Ross reflects on his experiences and his future as a teacher educator in his survey responses:

I am a product of my university's [Teacher] Education program. I have been on both sides of the experience, both as a professional year candidate and a mentor teacher, now a Liaison-in-Residence. Something that I try to do for the candidates I work with is remember the experience I had, remember the things I struggled with or that I felt confused about and try to work to make those things as transparent as possible for candidates.

Another thing that has been a learning experience for me is that I need to be willing to build authentic relationships with the candidates, one that still has professional boundaries, but one that also allows the candidates to be willing to take chances, to ask tough questions, to put everything they have into the process of becoming a professional educator, one that allows them to make mistakes and learn from them rather than being defeated by them. I have had, and continue to have many amazing models of this in my career, mentors who are always looking to build someone up rather than just be in an evaluative position.

I have been very wishy-washy about starting my doctoral program for the last few years and now with the LiR program offering me a view of what that could look like, I do believe I am finally going to start that and probably focus on something to do with teacher leadership that doesn't involve becoming a principal or school administrator. I have found that I really enjoy working with candidates and working to strengthen the profession of teaching (Ross PN, 2022, p. 3).

Figure 2 highlights Ross's development as a LiR and engagement as a teacher leader. Ross's developmental trajectory toward agency is based on his personal curiosity and inquiry into teacher education and leadership. He also drew strongly on his individual relationships and mentors with hopes of providing similar mentorship to his teacher candidates. Such a trajectory indicates that focusing on the development of teacher leaders in teacher education could have a sustainable effect on long-term teacher development, teacher leadership and growth toward autonomy and agency.

Leah's story

Like Ross, Leah cites her experience as a mentor teacher and LiR as a catalyst for improving her own teaching practice. In her interview, she said, "It really forced me to focus on the importance of what I'm doing and what my students are doing and what they're learning and how they're going to learn as time is developed" (Interview transcript, 2023, p. 8). Leah was also able to grow in her mentoring practice from "do what I do" to an inquiry-based coaching model of "Hey, let's try these things. And would you like to try this out?" (p. 8).

Leah also identified her experience as a mentor teacher as an important stepping stone into teacher leadership. Likewise, she highlighted her participation in the professional learning communities that the university provided and the support she had from her principal to fully participate. For Leah, her social network that spanned the boundary of her classroom into the university space inspired her to her own goals for professional growth. In her narrative responses, she wrote:

I was a mentor teacher for a few different candidates prior to becoming a LiR. I loved the experience of supporting and working alongside a future teacher. I truly felt that it made me a better teacher – I was

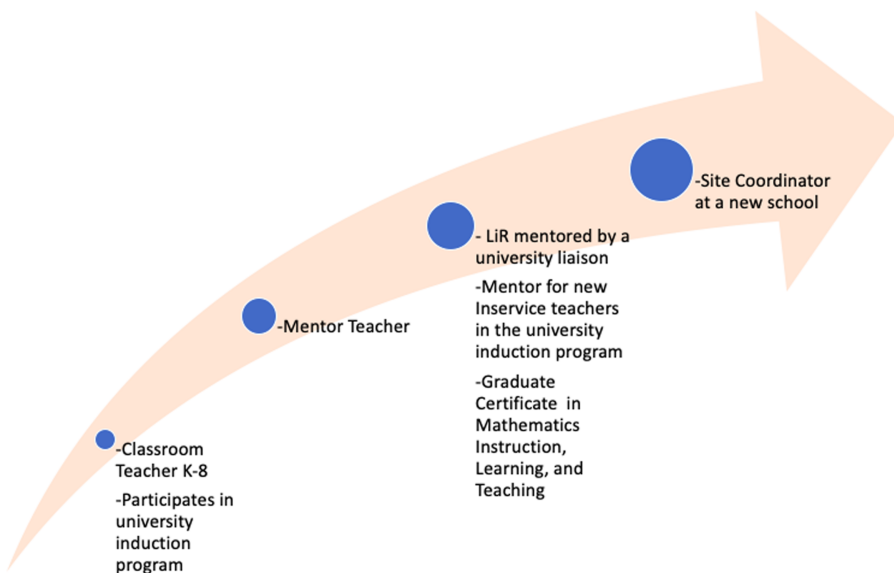


Figure 2. Ross's developmental trajectory

more reflective, intentional, and flexible in my teaching and professional development once I became a mentor. Becoming a LiR made that growth continue exponentially. Joining the team of the university's liaisons was inspiring.

I loved the collaboration and professional partnership of the powerhouse of people I was able to work with. It fostered a need in me to work harder and set a better example for candidates, coworkers, and myself. Working with the TELG group continued my learning from my masters (Educational Leadership and Administration) and helped me to set new professional goals for myself. All of this translated into the work I did with the candidates; creating a successful learning environment for future teachers to learn, grow, and better understand what it means to be an educator. As a LiR I enjoyed being able to utilize my masters while remaining in the classroom (Leah PN, 2022, p. 5).

Again, a focus on communities of practice was instrumental to Leah's development and path toward autonomy and agency as a teacher leader. She continued sharing:

My principal was always very supportive and felt that this program helped to grow teacher candidates that are ready for their first teaching experience. With the TELG group I participated in book studies, whole group and small group collaborations, I was able to shadow other liaisons and join other groups for seminars. I felt well-supported and that I had a voice at the table. When ready I was able to work independently with my cohort for seminars, and always knew that I had a support group if I had questions. As more LiRs joined I was able to offer my own advice and experience to help others. Quickly, some of us partnered together and were able to collaborate for seminars. The collective power of collaboration and professionalism that this group has is amazing. With covid it was easier to meet in our small [site] group and remain in person when we were able, rather than meeting online with a larger group. I felt that I had connected autonomy to do what was best for my group, while following the TELG calendar (Leah PN, 2022, pp. 1-2).

Leah's path toward professional agency was initiated with her work as a mentor teacher, expanded in her communities of practice where she developed voice and further developed in her own decision-making focused on her site context while also supported in her collaboration with other liaisons and teacher educators. Leah's professional learning was built through networks and relationships with other professionals. Being mentored as a teacher leader led to her development as a building leader and these experiences served as reciprocal influences on professional development.

Professional agency

Leah leveraged her professional agency as a LiR to move into a new role with her district. As the new Learning Coach for her building, she is now working with in-service teachers, elevating their teaching to increase student learning. Leah's teacher leadership led from coaching preservice teachers to coaching in-service teachers. Leah continued working within the S-UP. She is mentoring the new university liaison at her site, and she continues as the site coordinator, making matches between mentors and candidates and arranging visits to her campus for those interested in successful school partnership sites. Leah explains her new role in the following way in her personal narrative (2022):

Being a LiR gave me the experience and ability to move into a completely new role. . . As a Learning Coach my role is to work with other teachers in my building in a collaborative manner to help teachers with student-centered learning, clarity in their teaching and students' learning, as well as professional growth in what and how they are teaching. Without the experience I gained working with [university] I would not have been able to be a coach in the capacity that I am now. Many of the skills I learned working with teacher candidates have directly translated into working with classroom teachers. It has also helped me to pull teacher candidates into our coaching cycles in a way that they are comfortable and feel heard.

Like Stella's story, Leah's story indicates the larger impact of growth in the LiR role through taking on new roles and responsibilities and building on what was learned as an LiR. This development of agency and leadership serves the profession of teaching and education in more

ways than initial teacher preparation. Each LiR expanded its influence through its path toward professional agency. Leah continued her response: School-University Partnerships

Moving from being a LiR has been difficult for me. I very much enjoyed the work and the team. However, I am still able to work with new teacher candidates in my current role, and I love the work I am doing! Being a Learning Coach has been amazing. I love being a thinking partner, support person, and co-teaching with the amazing educators in my building. In the next five years, I would like to continue working in classrooms and helping teachers (or teacher candidates) be the best they can be and help all students learn and grow (Leah PN, 2022, p. 3).

Like Stella and Ross, Leah's narrative included future goals toward professional growth and teacher leadership. These narratives indicate key aspects of professional development – individual inquiry, communities of practice and mentors, and shifting to more voice and autonomy – while also suggesting potential paths toward further growth of teachers and leaders to sustain systems of development toward professional agency. See [Figure 3](#) for Leah's development as a LiR and teacher leader.

Influences on school-based teacher educator development

In the development of these school-based teacher educators, we identified three components across all three learning contexts that we believe contributed to the development of these teacher leaders: (1) a mentoring role as an entry point; (2) a co-liaising model and (3) developing a learning space with trust and autonomy. These components were framed through individual inquiry processes, mentoring and communities of practice. Further growth through voice and agency developed from trusting, collaborative relationships.

Mentoring first: developing confidence as an instructional leader

One common factor across all cases is that classroom teachers entered the LiR learning space through serving as a mentor teacher. This initial step toward teacher leadership helped these teachers develop confidence and identity as an instructional leader. They began inquiry processes by asking questions about their practice and the development of new teachers.

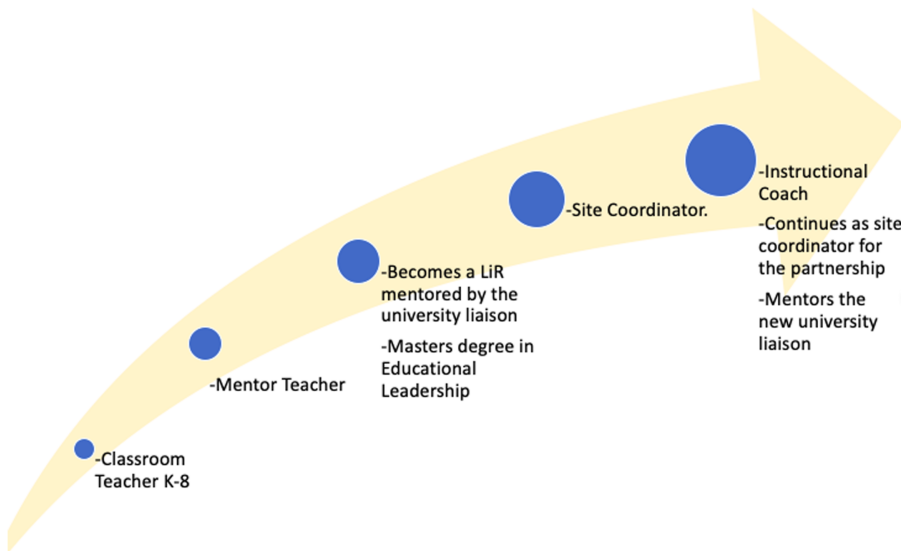


Figure 3. Leah's developmental trajectory

These inquiries guided them toward new mentors for themselves (e.g. co-liaisons) and taking risks as new teacher leaders. Being selected to mentor new teachers provided classroom teachers with affirmation of their talent as teachers. They learned how to notice, name, and enact impactful instructional strategies for their candidates. Through co-planning and co-teaching they helped their preservice candidates learn to decompose and enact these practices as well. They worked with other mentor teachers in their buildings and participated with the university liaison in providing feedback and setting goals with their candidate. Building on their roles as mentor teachers through communities of practice with not only other mentor teachers but also liaisons allowed for further development as teacher leaders. Thus, LiRs were crossing school and university boundaries in their S-UPs to engage in professional learning across communities of practice. They were learners and leaders in varied spaces, and their boundary-spanning participation influenced their professional agency in each context. Each LiR mentioned the TELG (liaison community of practice) in their interviews and personal narratives. Opportunities for talking through problems-of-practice or even participating in a book study (Leah and Stella) influenced LiR confidence so they could return to their school sites as the primary liaison and act with agency. As they shared, they “always felt comfortable reaching out to university liaisons when I had questions.”

Co-liaising

Another powerful influence on LiR development was the use of a co-liaising model. All three participants consistently highlighted the important space of the university liaison working alongside them as they began their LiR role. Just like co-teaching for preservice teachers, LiR's were able to gain capacity in their new role through co-planning seminars, conducting joint observations, and engaging in debriefing sessions and candidate goal-setting side by side. Intentional and gradual release of responsibility by university-based liaisons was crucial to these LiR's developing autonomy. University liaisons had to relinquish control in small pieces while providing encouragement and support. *Letting go* proved to be difficult at times for university liaisons, depending on how long they had invested in the individual school partnership. Even though it is difficult, the strategy is for the LiR to take on full responsibility while the university liaison moves on to develop new partnerships. Ross most clearly outlined his scaffolded steps toward autonomy in liaison activities in his school. Another key to the success of co-liaising is the delivery of continued support and relationship between the university liaison and LiR after the LiR is autonomous in their school building. Both players still need mutual support for their continued development. Each participant mentioned the importance of continued support from the university, including other university liaisons and professional communities of practice.

With co-liaising as the strategy, LiR development was supported through communities of practice and mentoring. The shared inquiry and collaborative dialogue involved in gradual release to scaffold individual autonomy could only be supported through trusting relationships and legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger, 1998). The cultivation of mutual trust in communities of practice and mentoring led to individual agency and voice in the LiRs.

Mutual trust and autonomy

One imperative to developing teacher leaders is the establishment of an environment of mutual trust and autonomy in the learning space to allow for risk-taking and decision-making to take place. This risk-taking scaffolded individual voice and professional agency in a collaborative, safe space. The trust of the building administrator cannot be underestimated. These teacher leaders were able to take on more and more responsibility only with the encouragement, trust, and support of the building principal. Leah's story included specific mentoring from her principal in her move toward coaching mentor teachers (her peers) and managing the systems in placements and partnership with the university. Principals in successful clinical partnerships engage in a model of shared leadership within their buildings, including the social networks

surrounding the work of a LiR and university-based liaison. Navigating social networks and serving as a boundary-spanner in the role of LiR involves complexity leadership (Snow, 2025; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017) in a partnership context. Over time, the LiR takes on more responsibility for the operation of the partnership and engages in shared decision-making in difficult situations. The mutual trust and collaboration necessary for complexity leadership lead to autonomy, agency and shared benefit to all partners in the partnership and professional space.

Implications for practice and contribution to the field

We believe that these key influences for developing school-based teacher educators can be adapted for use in many school settings. The development of teacher leaders is important for the sustainability of school districts in meeting their vision and mission. The LiR Model allows districts to grow their own educational leaders. These teacher leaders have a hand in increasing the knowledge and skills of other teachers through informal mentoring. This model provides classroom teachers with an avenue for professional growth and recognition within a district without having to leave their classrooms. This could lead to increased retention of experienced teachers as they are provided with new challenges through shared leadership.

As indicated in Figure 4, LiRs in this study initially engaged their work within their classrooms as mentor teachers. They grew from classroom teachers to leaders through their roles as mentor teachers for their peers and teacher candidates. As they articulated their instructional decision-making for teacher candidates, they also developed the capacity for articulating their mentoring practices for teacher candidates with other mentor teachers. Their professional learning and leadership expanded their role mentoring teacher candidates as they took up responsibilities as a LiR. In the initial years as an LiR, they benefitted from a co-liaison model where they shared responsibility for liaison activities in their S-UP. As they gained confidence, they developed agency and began practicing liaison responsibilities without as much support from their co-liaison. Key to this development were the communities of practice across contexts where liaisons shared in decision-making and inquiry into problems of practice. These communities further supported LiR development through their emphasis on mutual trust and autonomy. Knowing they had a space to come back to (e.g. TELG as a community of practice) supported LiR in enacting responses to inquiry questions and developing professional agency through their boundary-spanning roles and developing social networks.

These transitions involved spanning boundaries across p-12 and higher education institutions *and* brokering knowledge within different roles within the school context in which LiRs worked (Akkerman & Bakkar, 2011). The complex negotiation required sustained support from others within their buildings and across contexts (e.g. other school partnership

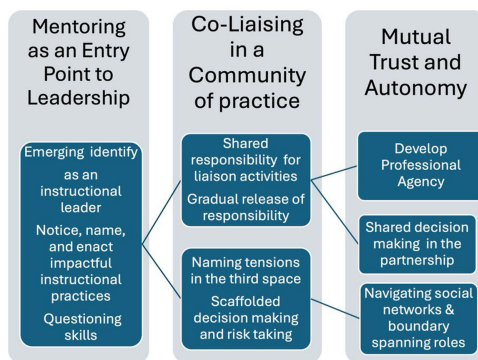


Figure 4. Model for LiR development

stakeholders and the university stakeholders). The stories of these LiR's identified the importance of the scaffolded growth – both through the different roles and positions and through the mentoring and co-responsibility before deeper independence and developing agency.

Practice-level implications

This study indicates the importance of further support and development of mentor teachers as teacher leaders. Creating space in S-UPs for mentor teachers as teacher leaders and extended roles in meeting the vision of the S-UP is the first step, whether it is a clinical supervision role or other leadership or coaching development. In the case of new roles as clinical supervisors, co-liaising was key to the LiR development as there was a gradual release of responsibility. This move paralleled the mentor teacher's release to a teacher candidate in classroom teaching. Through the co-liaison model, LiRs were supported through initial coaching and shared liaison responsibilities with a more seasoned liaison. Based on individual capacity, these co-liaison structures were based on the distinct needs of individual LiRs. For example, one relationship may have engaged in more observation cycle support while another highlighted mentor teacher development within the individual school site. LiRs also built confidence and independence through their participation in shared communities of practice, like TELG and book study groups.

Key to the LiR Development Model is the support and trusting relationships developed in communities of practice. S-UPs could engage in the practice of formal, or required, communities of practice as well as possibilities for smaller, more informal communities of practice, like book study groups or inquiry focus networks. These communities of practice allow for engaging together as boundary-spanners who could recognize boundaries among school-based, university-based, mentoring and liaising practices. This shared recognition, if not full understanding, based on the individual school contexts, allows for developing agency and autonomy at the same time.

Other partnerships could more intentionally develop mentor teacher inquiry to grow teacher leadership. Another key component is to structure communities of practice for these teacher leaders to further develop voice and autonomy while having the shared community and individual mentors to rely on for support and guidance – or even to serve as a sounding board. These communities of practice cross the boundaries and complexity of the work of S-UPs. The fact that these teacher leaders are continuing their development and focused on influencing others means that systems to support teacher leadership could be supported and sustained through clinically rich teacher education.

Directions for future research

The importance of naming and honoring the complexity of S-UPs also merits continued inquiry into the situated contexts and complex nature of the work of multiple stakeholders within S-UPs. Having a community to discuss the uncertain ideas involved in complexity leadership benefits the role of teacher leaders who are working in systems where there are often leadership positions *and* leadership responsibilities. S-UPs benefit from complexity leadership where decisions are negotiated and made based on the importance of context (Snow, 2025) and within multi-membership (Fenton-O-Creevy *et al.*, 2015). Digging deeper into cases of complexity leadership would be an interesting direction for future research. Focus on the complexity of the contexts of S-UPs or even the complexity of boundary-spanning roles could highlight more avenues for future actions in practice as well.

In this study, we analyzed findings connected to the development of p-12 school-based teacher educators as they journeyed from scaffolded support in the role of liaison to autonomy and agency. Deeper inquiry into these cases and similar roles could lead to further development of frameworks for teacher leadership (Butler *et al.*, 2025) and boundary-spanning roles that occur in school–university partnerships and clinical field experiences in teacher education

(Burns *et al.*, 2015). The purposeful mentoring and scaffolded support through co-liaison structures and communities of practice allow p-12 school-based teacher educators, LiRs in this case, to develop as teacher education leaders while maintaining their positions as classroom teachers. We believe these cases inform those who prepare and support school-based teacher educators and offer ideas for re-visioning the work and roles in clinical experiences for preservice teachers. Additionally, these cases uncover insights into teacher leadership (Wenner & Campbell, 2017) and systems that could support teacher leadership development and its growth over time and space.

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Jennifer Snow will be affiliated with University of Montana, Phyllis J Washington College of Education as of July 1, 2026.

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