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Hasan Alnajjar (h.najjar@ju.edu.jo), Department of Mathematics, University of Jordan, Jordan, and Brian W Curtin\* (bcurtin@math.usf.edu), Department of Mathematics and Statistics, University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Ave. PHY 114, Tampa, FL 33620. Leonard pairs associated with sl<sub>2</sub>.

The equitable basis x, y, z of the Lie algebra  $sl_2$  satisfies [x, y] = 2x + 2y, [y, z] = 2y + 2z, [z, x] = 2z + 2x. We show that every Leonard pair A, A<sup>\*</sup> of classical type (Racah, Hahn, dual Hahn, or Krawtchouk) acts as a linear combination of I, x, y, xy and I, y, z, yz, respectively. We then discuss extending these Leonard pairs to Leonard triples from this perspective. (Received February 26, 2009)