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J. Luciano Beltramo

University of Southern California, [beltramo@usc.edu](mailto:beltramo@usc.edu)

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# The Experiences of Teacher-Assistant Principals in Catholic Elementary Schools: Boundary Spanners and Player Managers

## **Cover Page Footnote**

The author would like to thank Jennifer Beltramo, Marlene Pugach, and Elena Son for their feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript.

## The Experiences of Teacher-Assistant Principals in Catholic Elementary Schools: Boundary Spanners and Player Managers

J. Luciano Beltramo  
University of Southern California

*This article presents a phenomenological study of teacher-assistant principals (teacher-APs) in Catholic elementary schools. Drawing from player manager and role theories, this article describes the lived experiences of these individuals, particularly how they perceive the benefits and constraints of their unique role in both faculty and administration. Analysis of participant interviews reveals three heuristic models of the teacher-AP experience: boundary teachers who ally more closely with faculty; boundary administrators who take on a more executive identity; and player-managers who equally participate in, and perceive to bridge, the administrative and faculty spheres. Findings also suggest that the experiences of these teacher-APs are highly dependent on the current principal and his/her perceived administrative needs.*

### Keywords

Catholic school administration, assistant principals, phenomenology, teacher-administrators, teacher leadership

School administrators across the country, particularly in Catholic schools, face unprecedented challenges in today's educational context. Districts, dioceses, and schools have seen their budgets frozen or decreasing year after year, limiting the number of personnel in both classrooms and administrative offices (Cuiccio, 2012; Killion, 2013; Levenson, 2012; Oliff, Mai, & Leachman, 2012). In addition, schools are under increasing pressures to improve student outcomes while simultaneously implementing demanding instructional reforms such as Common Core State Standards (Odden, 2012; Oxley & Baete, 2012). In Catholic schools, whose low enrollments have resulted in the closure of hundreds of schools nationwide (McDonald, 2012; McDonald & Schultz, 2009), the stakes for principals are even higher. In the Archdioceses of New York and Philadelphia alone, nearly 100 schools closed between 2010 and 2014, causing principals in these and other urban areas to

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worry not just about student learning, but also about the very survival of their schools, including the personnel jobs contingent on their existence (Otterman, 2013; Shrum, 2012). Complicating these issues even further is the critical shortage of qualified school principals in both the public (Loeb, Kalogrides, & Horng, 2010; Pijanowski, Hewitt, & Brady, 2009) and Catholic school sectors (Ozar, 2010).

In response to the challenges of today's educational context, principals and school district officials are turning to teachers and teacher leaders to help ease their administrative burden (Cooper, 1993; Golden, 1997; Kealey, 1999), both in the implementation of instructional reforms (Margolis, 2012), and in efforts to recruit and train future administrators (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). In some of these cases, teachers are asked to take on "quasi-administrative" positions in which they assume administrative responsibilities while retaining their other duties in classroom instruction or instructional leadership (Johnson & Donaldson, 2011; Margolis, 2012).

Despite this trend, the literature in both teacher leadership and school administration has a paucity of studies on quasi-administrative or teacher-administrator positions, and what few peripheral examinations exist tend to focus almost exclusively on the challenges associated with this position (Finco, 2011; Perez & Dagen, 2011; Shearer & Vogt, 2004). Principals seeking guidance on how to include teachers effectively within administration are thus left with little direction, or might be discouraged from doing so altogether—an especially difficult prospect for principals who lack the funds to hire a full-time assistant administrator.

To advance the discourse around the inclusion of teachers in administration, the following inquiry explores the lived experiences of Catholic school teacher-assistant principals (teacher-APs), individuals who assume an official title and responsibilities in administration while serving as full- or part-time classroom instructors. Specifically, this study aims to describe the ways by which teacher-APs make sense of their dual roles and the collegial relationships inherent within them. In addition, the research here examines how teacher-APs understand their service to both principals and teachers, and explores the possible challenges and affordances associated with this work. In so doing, the study seeks to raise critical issues for school leaders to consider as they incorporate teacher leadership into administrative matters.

### Literature Review

Within the literature on school leadership, only a small number of works

has explored the experiences of administrators who concurrently hold responsibilities in classroom instruction. Cooper (1993) and Golden (1997) each described different initiatives within New York City public schools that attempted to break apart large high schools into smaller units, which were then managed by teachers serving in administrative capacities. Meanwhile, in parochial education, Kealey (1999) published a collection of brief job reflections composed by Catholic school assistant principals, a segment of whom also served as classroom teachers. These works represent descriptive pieces written for a nonscholarly audience. Although they helped to introduce the experiences of teacher-administrators to practitioners in educational leadership, the lack of analysis and theoretical foundation in these pieces limited their findings purely to a description of the phenomenon, providing few recommendations for educational leaders and future scholarship.

An exception to such descriptive studies can be found in the work of Murdoch (2003), who utilized survey data from Australian schools to examine the experiences of “teaching principals,” head administrators who continued to teach part time. Murdoch (2003) found that the dual role of his respondents undermined their work in both teaching and administration. The author concluded that principals without any assistance in administration tended to experience job futility and overload, especially within a climate of state accountability.

School administrators looking to avoid the same fate as those described in Murdoch’s study have increasingly begun enlisting the help of teachers, particularly in the implementation of instructional reform policies (Margolis, 2012). Scholars in the field of teacher leadership classify teachers in such positions as “quasi-administrators” (Johnson & Donaldson, 2011). Although quasi-administrators have been found to provide a substantial service to their principals, they are more often associated in the literature with a host of challenges, including ambiguity (Margolis, 2012), burnout (Perez & Dagen, 2011), conflict with other faculty members (Finco, 2011), and feelings of powerlessness (Shearer & Vogt, 2004). The study of quasi-administrators, however, remains at the periphery of teacher leadership inquiry, and few if any investigations have centered exclusively on this position, despite its prevalence in schools. Moreover, the literature in this area has only addressed teachers who are given administrative duties without being granted a formal office and title in administration. Thus, it remains to be explored how an individual with official posts in both instruction and administration (such as a teacher-AP) might experience the job differently when serving his or her school and prin-

cipal. But why might holding dual titles matter for quasi-administrators?

## Theoretical Framework

### Boundary Spanners

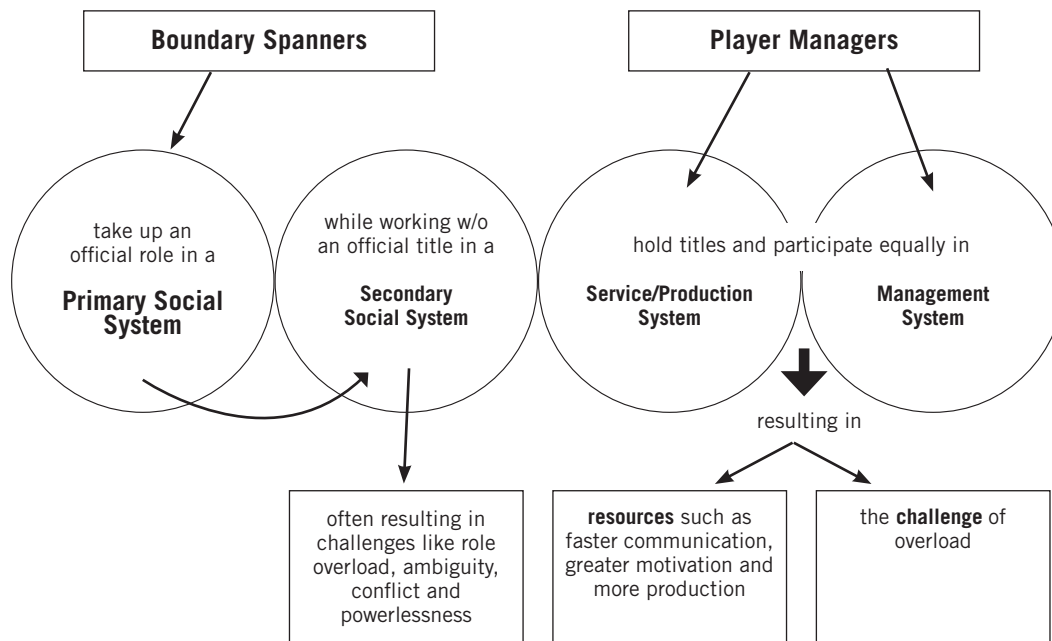
Exploration of theories in organization and management points to the importance of the formal authority that comes with an official title and job responsibilities, particularly for individuals who operate simultaneously in two different social systems. Scholars in role theory (Biddle, 1979; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, & Snoek, 1964) have suggested that individuals such as quasi-administrators serve as boundary spanners; that is, they are given an office, title, and authority in one social system of an organization (i.e., classroom teaching) but are expected to complete tasks across the boundaries in another system (i.e., administration) in which they lack a specific and recognized office. According to role theory, boundary spanners are prone to a host of role problems, including conflict, ambiguity, overload, and isolation (Kahn et al., 1964).

The problems experienced by boundary spanners are generally a result of power discrepancies between the two roles they inhabit (Kahn et al., 1964). Within her or his primary social system, a boundary spanner usually fulfills a role endowed with certain authority over members of that group. However, a boundary spanner typically lacks formal power over others in the secondary system, despite being tasked with certain outcomes that necessitate their cooperation. This power struggle is exacerbated when the two social systems across which a boundary spanner works hold opposing norms or interests. Conflicts that arise between social systems often prevent boundary spanners from using interpersonal skills and relationship-building—their only sources of intergroup influence—to accomplish the tasks assigned to their roles. Moreover, with role expectations in two different systems, boundary spanners may be unclear about the demands of their official role in the secondary group, or become overwhelmed in trying to meet each group's expectations. In addition to these effects of ambiguity and overload, boundary spanners often experience isolation in their attempts to meet the conflicting needs of two groups while trying to maintain the appearance of disinterest needed for trust. This theory might explain why teacher leaders given administrative tasks without a formal title, authority, and clear office in administration can experience the problems reported in the literature reviewed earlier.

### Player Managers

In contrast to theory around boundary spanners stands a model from the field of management studies referred to as “player managers” (Augar & Palmer, 2002) (see Figure 1). Instead of belonging primarily to one social arrangement and simply interacting with another (as would a boundary spanner), player managers simultaneously occupy official posts in two systems and operate with clear roles and legitimate authority within both groups. Augar and Palmer (2002) have pointed to examples of player managers in common public settings, such as hospitals managed by doctors who continue their practice in medicine, or schools in which administrators continue to teach in classrooms.

Through their equal participation and authority in administration and service, player managers activate tightly coupled challenges and resources, both at the individual and organizational levels (Augar & Palmer, 2002). Like boundary spanners, player managers face substantial workloads that increase the possibility of overload and job strain. However, because player managers work in the service operations that they concurrently manage, these individuals can facilitate communication across the organization, increase motivation and buy-in among coworkers, and gain career preparation for higher levels of management. Thus, this theory of management raises the possibility that if teachers were granted an office with formal title and authority in administration—as might be found in teacher-APs—some of the problems quasi-administrators face, like ambiguity and conflict, might be addressed, while simultaneously activating particular resources that could benefit a school and its principal.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual map of theoretical framework.

Adapted from Augar & Palmer (2002) and Kahn et al. (1964)

### Research Questions

Together, the theories of boundary spanners and player managers present a helpful framework with which to examine the experiences of teacher-APs; and, when taken up in the challenging educational context facing principals and school leaders today, they raise particular questions that drive this research:

1. How do teacher-APs make sense of their dual roles, as well as the responsibilities and collegial relationships therein?
2. In what ways do teacher-APs report assisting their principals and teachers in implementing policies and instructional reforms?
3. What kind of constraints and challenges do teacher-APs experience in their work, and to what extent (if any) is this work perceived to prepare them for a future career in the principalship?



### Methodology

The current study addressed these questions by employing a phenomenological approach to investigate the perceptions of teacher-APs in Catholic elementary (K–8) schools. Although a variety of definitions exist for phenomenological research, I borrow from Giorgi's (2005, 2012) characterization of this methodology as the formal study of the appearance of things as they are manifested in consciousness and communicated by multiple individuals in everyday language. This investigation follows the particular steps of descriptive phenomenology—a branch of the methodology that places greater emphasis on the words of participants than on the interpretations of the researcher (Creswell 2007; Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1994).

To recruit participants, I contacted via email over a hundred K–8 schools from a large archdiocese on the West Coast of the U.S., where the teacher-AP model of leadership is fairly prevalent. After speaking with respondents from the initial recruitment efforts, I secured the participation of 15 individuals, a typical sample size for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2007). Although each participant served her or his school as an assistant principal and full-to-half-time teacher, great variation existed among the individuals' background characteristics, grade level and subjects taught, school demographics, and job experience (see Table 1).

I interviewed each of the participants on two separate occasions (once in the fall of 2012 and again in the spring of 2013) (Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). Averaging just over an hour each in length, these interviews covered four general topics: (a) the participants' formal and informal duties as assistant principals, (b) their relationships with faculty members and principals, (c) their perceptions of potential affordances and constraints of their role as teacher-assistant principal, and (d) their interests in and preparation for a future career in the principalship.

Table 1

*Participant Characteristics, School Demographics, Experience, and Teaching Responsibilities*

	Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Race/ethnicity	SES <sup>a</sup> Level of School	School Enrollment	Experience Teaching (years)	Experience in Administration (years)	Percentage of Day Spent as Classroom Teacher	Grade Level/ Subject Taught
Boundary Teachers	Barbara	Female	White	2	257	14	4	100	Grade 2 - Self-contained
	Dolores	Female	Latina	9	335	10	2	100	Grade 6-8 Language Arts
	Mary Catherine	Female	Latina	5	190	46	28	100	Grade 8 - Self-contained
	Sally	Female	White	4	213	43	18	100	Grade 5 - Self-contained
	Tony	Male	Latino	4	245	16	7	85	Grade 7 - Math; Grade 8-Science, Soc. St. & Spanish
Boundary Administrators	Betty	Female	White	1	240	16	6	100	Kindergarten-Self-contained
	Jennie	Female	Latina	5	211	33	15	50	Grades 6-8- Language Arts; K-8-Music
	Maria	Female	Latina	8	192	13	1	60	K-8- Computers & Technology
	Sarah	Female	White	3	208	8	6	100	Grade 5 - Self-contained
Player-Managers	Anna	Female	White	2	315	22	4	100	Grades 6-8 Language Arts
	Elizabeth	Female	White	3	293	7	1	75	Grade 4 - Self-contained
	Elle	Female	White	5	265	11	4	50	Grades 6-8 Language Arts
	Gloria	Female	Latina	4	305	5	2	75	Grade 7&8- Math, Science & Religion
	Kimberly	Female	Latina	7	180	11	2	100	Grade 1- Self-contained
	Rebecca	Female	Latina	10	220	13	7	100	Grade 6-8 - Soc. St. & Religion

a The archdiocese in which participants worked categorized its schools into 10 socioeconomic levels, with the first level representing schools that served the most affluent families and the 10th level representing schools that served families living below the poverty line.

Transcriptions of these interviews were explored in the three stages of descriptive phenomenological analysis (Creswell, 2007; Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). In the first stage, I analyzed the transcript data for a textural description of the phenomenon, wherein meaning units of what the participants experienced were identified, coded, and organized by theme. The second stage consisted of a structural analysis to identify how the phenomenon was experienced—that is, (a) the significance that the participants highlighted in those meaning units and (b) the contexts in which those meaning units took place (Moustakas, 1994). In the final stage of analysis, I engaged in pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2013), a recursive process of “zooming in and zooming out” from the data. I continually identified and refined thematic patterns across textural and structural descriptions through a cycle of transcription rereads, in-depth memoing, and coding recategorization, all driven by a search within the data for both supportive and disconfirming evidence.

Throughout the process of recruiting participants, collecting data, and analyzing transcripts, I participated in another central component of descriptive phenomenological research—*epoché* (Moustakas, 1994). Here, I engaged in bracketing exercises, which consisted of extensive reflexive writing for the purposes of uncovering the influence of previous experience. In particular, I reflected on my own previous work as a teacher-AP, and how this personal experience shaped my investigative decisions and meaning-making processes throughout the inquiry. Scholars in qualitative research in general (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and phenomenology more specifically (Giorgi, 2005; Moustakas, 1994) have posited that a researcher’s personal experiences in the focal phenomenon can (and should) never be completely controlled for or set aside. Rather, the researcher should leverage this previous familiarity to further the research, while taking specific measures to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In this case, I drew from my experiences as a former teacher-AP to gain access to and recruit a purposive sample, to inform the construction of relevant interview protocols, and to build rapport and trust with participants. However, to limit the influence of my previous professional experiences in the analysis process, I took several steps aimed at foregrounding the voices and experiences of the participants: First, I utilized theoretical triangulation by analyzing the data from the two theories presented earlier to interrogate the interview transcripts from multiple perspectives outside my own personal experience. Second, I engaged in ongoing conversations with peer research-

ers, who served as critical “auditors” (Creswell, 2007) of the analysis process and forced me to consider my emerging conjectures in light of how they privileged the stories of participants over my own reflections captured in the epoche. Third, I conducted “member checking” by presenting themes from early data analysis to the participants, whose feedback was then incorporated into revisions of those conjectures.

### Findings

This process of data analysis found that experiences of the position varied across the participants. At the same time, however, important similarities emerged among certain groups of these individuals, which resulted in the creation of three broad categories of teacher-AP experiences: boundary teachers, boundary administrators, and player managers.

#### Teachers on the Periphery of Administration, or Boundary Teachers

Five of the participants (Barbara, Dolores, Mary Catherine, Sally, and Tony) described their roles as those of teachers who also served on the periphery of administration. That is, their roles reflected those of a boundary spanner—one whose primary system of work was located in teaching, and whose smaller, secondary role required interaction with and service in administration. Thus, they might be considered *boundary teachers*, or teachers who cross the boundary to work occasionally for and/or with administration.

These boundary teachers reported that most of their duties outside of the classroom consisted of narrow managerial tasks such as substituting for an absent principal, collecting teacher paperwork, distributing and ordering test materials and textbooks, and procuring substitutes for absent teachers. Boundary teachers seldom engaged in leadership tasks at the administrative level. At times, these teacher-APs were notified of administrative decisions before others, but otherwise were rarely involved in assisting the principal with the actual decision-making process:

I just feel like [the principal] only treats me as an administrator when he prefaces things sometimes with like, ‘I’m telling you because you’re part of administration.’ But then I feel like what he says doesn’t apply to that. I just feel like sometimes he’s just throwing me a bone, (laughs) like the administrative bone (laughs). Or he’s just trying to make me feel like I’m in that role, but I don’t. As much as he wants to give me responsibilities, I feel like he really does want to oversee everything. (Dolores)

Given few administrative responsibilities and even less say in school policy, the participants here tended to envision themselves more as teachers, rarely identifying as administrators:

I'm really just a teacher with a title on the side. I do a couple things in admin, but really I don't do much anymore. For me, the vice principalship is like when you marry a duke and then you get to be called the duchess—it's a title but I don't really do anything. (Sally)

With only a smattering of duties in administration, these boundary teachers reported a central focus on classroom instruction, and generally viewed other teachers as peers and friends rather than as subordinates. However, on occasion, their administrative role—despite its limited scope and nature—interfered with these valued teacher relations, particularly when the teacher-APs were asked to report on or supervise the work of their colleagues:

It's tough to tell [teachers] who are getting the hard judgment, 'Listen, these were the criteria, and you didn't do them or hit them.' And then suddenly, it might be interpreted that I don't have that person's back and I'm not supportive, when really it was their problem from the beginning and I am just the one who has to explain the fallout. (Barbara)

At other times, the participants in this group were asked by their teachers to advocate for policy change to the principal, but because they held little voice in such matters, the teacher-APs perceived themselves to be futile “middlemen,” or intermediaries, stuck in the mire of school micropolitics:

The other faculty members would start to ask me for things and bring things to me, because they would say, 'Well, I don't want to talk with [the principal] about this, so you say it.' Sometimes it was an important issue that they would bring up to me, and I knew something should be said to the principal. But then how do you get it out there if you're not given a lot of consideration, or if you're expected to just follow orders? And I remember being a middleman as a kid and having that same problem and thinking, “This doesn't end very well, no matter how you deal with it.” (Barbara)

In both circumstances, the boundary teachers reported discomfort in conflicting loyalties to their faculty peers and friends on the one hand and to their principals on the other. These experiences often left the teacher-APs resentful of their titles, which—coupled with their lack of involvement in and connection to administration—may have contributed to their overall apathy for advancement to the principalship:

I mean, if they took the job away from me, it wouldn't bother me because then I'd have more time to spend with the kids . . . I sat down with the previous principal and said, 'If you don't want me to be vice principal, just let me know and it won't hurt my feelings one bit.' I'll still do what needs to be done, but I just don't care that much about being a part of administration. (Mary Catherine)

### **Administrators on the Periphery of the Faculty System, or Boundary Administrators**

In contrast, a second group of participants (Betty, Jennie, Maria, and Sarah) saw their role as teacher-APs primarily in terms of administration, and articulated only a peripheral connection to faculty life. Thus, these individuals might be considered *boundary administrators*—boundary spanners whose central role was in administration, and whose teaching duties and relationships with faculty were more understated.

Unlike the boundary teachers of the first category, the individuals in this second group reported substantial involvement in the workings of administration. Whereas some of these teacher-APs engaged in managerial tasks similar to those of boundary teachers (serving as deans of discipline or standardized test coordinators), the majority of these participants also took on leadership roles in such areas as curriculum, instruction, and accreditation. These boundary administrators closely collaborated with their principals in a number of school-wide matters and policies:

I did everything with the principal. I did the budget, I went to school board meetings and PTO meetings. I mean, we went everywhere together. So, if she was in a meeting, I was in the meeting. If it was a staff meeting, it was the two of us. If it was a meeting with the Archdiocese downtown, it was the two of us. If she was disciplining an employee, it was the two of us together doing it. We made all those decisions for the school together. (Sarah)

In most of these cases, the participants' close working relationships with their principals eventually developed into personal friendships that extended beyond the school walls.

Whether immediately or over time, the individuals in this second category began to identify themselves primarily as administrators, and secondarily as teachers:

I had to make it clear that I was an administrator first, and then a teacher. Basically, that way I could organize myself, my job, and my program of work. (Betty)

If I meet a new person, I usually tell them I'm a vice principal, and I teach in the middle school. I am both, but I feel more like a vice principal. (Jennie)

Their encounters with teachers tended to reflect this stance; each of the boundary administrators reported more distanced, hierarchical (rather than collegial) relationships with teachers, emphasizing that their work with teachers mostly occurred in a supervisory rather than collaborative role:

If [my job] meant that I had to get a teacher to fall in line, or get paper work in, or do something, then the teacher knew I had to do my job and keep them accountable. Out of school was out of school, but when you're at work, you have to do the job you do. (Betty)

However, when faculty members resisted new policies from the administration, most of the participants in this category reported feeling powerless in resolving these conflicts; their role in administration afforded them access to shaping policies but did not include the authority to enforce them through teacher sanctions or termination:

In the other schools where I've been the curriculum coordinator, either I hired the staff or I was in charge of rehiring and letting teachers go. But it's different here. I lead the teachers in professional development and implementing Common Core, but if they don't do it, I can't keep teachers accountable myself. That's the principal. (Maria)

Additionally, these teacher-APs reported that their administrative duties amounted to those of a second full-time job, which in turn led to feelings of overload and burnout. As a way of coping with this problem, several of these boundary administrators reported making efforts to compartmentalize their two roles, but in many instances, administrative duties still tended to cut into their instructional practices:

As it is, I only teach about half time here, and then when emergencies happen or decisions need to be made with [my principal on campus], I have to leave my students and get to the office. Plus when I'm here late for meetings or whatever, I can't [lesson] plan like I used to. (Jennie)

Although the teacher-APs in this category appreciated being involved in administration, particularly in the principal's decision-making processes, they

cited strains with teachers, sacrifices in the classroom, and an overburdening workload as sources of dissatisfaction in the job:

Catholic schools really have to look at the stress level of their teacher-APs. If you're going to have a teacher who's also going to be an assistant principal, then you have to make it manageable for the teacher to do that. You teach all day and you don't have any time off from your teaching duties. So, if you're going to have that, then you've got to be sure to provide the proper environment for that assistant principal so that he or she does not become overloaded and then stressed out and then quit. (Betty)

Were it not for their loyalty to and relationship with their principals, these boundary administrators claimed, they would not choose to remain in this position over the long term, and—not surprisingly—none expressed a desire to move on to the principalship.

### **Teacher-APs Equally Involved in Faculty and Administration, or Player Managers**

A third group of participants emphasized significant participation within both the administration and faculty systems. These individuals described their roles not as boundary spanners who emphasized one aspect of the position over another, but as *player managers* who equally took part in instructional matters and school leadership.

This third category of teacher-AP experiences reflects attributes from each of the former groups, but distinguishes itself in critical respects. Like the first category of participants, these six player managers (Anna, Elizabeth, Elle, Gloria, Kimberly, and Rebecca) reported close ties to their faculty and enjoyed support from colleagues as friends. At the same time, these individuals were able to serve their teachers as both mentors and instructional leaders:

I think I'm pretty close to all the teachers; some of us even talk on the phone or go out together on the weekends. But we also have good working relationships. Like, when I run WASC [accreditation] things, I can tell them 'You're doing this section of the WASC document, we're doing that section . . .' and they'll always come through for me . . . [The administrative role] never really interferes with our friendships, and in some ways it even helps build them, like when I help the new teachers when they come in. (Kimberly)



Like the second category of participants, the teacher-APs here also developed close working—and sometimes personal—relationships with their principals:

[The principal and I] have venting sessions all the time (laughter). She'll come to my room, and we'll close the door, and then she'll just talk. And there are days when I'll go to her office and just talk. It's that kind of relationship we have, where we can joke about things. But we can also be very serious and work well together. (Rebecca)

Each of the player managers here was heavily involved in her principals' decision-making processes, and many of them assumed both managerial and leadership responsibilities, such as serving as curriculum specialist, professional development leader, marketing director, and parent communication coordinator.

Being ensconced in the faculty and administration of a school afforded these individuals a unique perspective, one that they saw as an asset, not only for their job, but also for the school as a whole:

With this job, what comes to mind is just a duality – having a double perspective, being able to see the school from a brand new set of eyes. What's important is being comfortable in both positions at the same time. (Elle)

When you're in this job, you're not just in the classroom and you're not just in admin; you're right in the middle. You know about teaching, and at the same time, you know about what's going on in the principal's office, so you won't forget how either side feels. So, I think you can serve as a bridge between the principal and the teachers because you're not gone from either area. (Gloria)

With varied roles and close relationships across the faculty-administration divide, the teacher-APs in this group recounted many instances in which one group asked for assistance in dealing with another, particularly in the area of instructional policy. For example, the teachers at Kimberly's school would often ask Kimberly to negotiate extended deadlines with the principal for turning in work such as accreditation evidence or curriculum plans. In other instances, participants such as Elle and Elizabeth reported working on behalf of their principals to motivate and empower their teachers to undertake new and challenging classroom reforms aimed at student equity and inclusion.

The player managers valued this opportunity to work across hierarchical lines:

As a vice principal and a teacher, you're working, day-to-day, to improve the job you're in. I get to be that advisor for the principal, but being in

this dual role, you're still very close to the teachers as well as your position—your own teaching. You see the struggles that teachers are having, whether it's parent communication or not feeling support from the principal and that's what I'm then trying to improve as vice principal. And that's what makes this job meaningful for me. (Gloria)

This sense of professional satisfaction carried over into their positive outlook on administration in general. Although these participants identified as teachers at heart and cited a deep affinity for teaching, they did not envision their work in administration as a great departure from this stance. Rather, they saw administrators as “teachers of teachers,” people who applied their knowledge of learning and classroom instruction to guiding and developing the skills of their faculty members. From this perspective on administration, the majority of these teacher-APs not only expressed an active interest in becoming a principal someday, but also shared a belief that their dual role in teaching and administration helped prepare them for the more practical, day-to-day experiences and capacities of the principalship.

Not without its challenges, however, the teacher-AP job was described by these player managers as a major professional commitment requiring extraordinary effort and time:

You have to put in even more time [than a teacher would]. You attend all these meetings at night, and do whatever else these is to do as part of administration. There is just way more time that you have to spend. It affects you. But it also affects your family, too. I have a husband who says, ‘Where are you? Why are you never home?’ I'm here at school, literally, almost every day until 6:30, 7:00 PM. I'm always doing something for the students or the school. (Anna)

For individuals like Elizabeth and Kimberly, a balance between the demands of professional and personal life could still be found within the position; others, like Gloria and Rebecca, however, did not view the workload required of a teacher-AP as sustainable in the long term.

### **Switching Categories: The Possibility of Change**

The three categories described above represent heuristics that help to classify and describe the participants' in a single school year; however, the experiences of a teacher-AP should not be seen as fixed in one category. Rather, job perceptions of the teacher-APs studied here seemed to change substan-

tially with a transition in the lead administrator, especially for participants like Sally, who had served under multiple principals over the course of many years in the position:

When I was here with [my previous principal], that was great, because she really, really relied on me a lot. She got some money to hire a part-time teacher who taught for me in the afternoons while I did administrative things. I got to be the religion coordinator for the school. I worked on the religion committee for the Archdiocese. I took care of the teachers here and made sure they did all of the requirements for certification. I also attended parent and teacher conferences with [my previous principal] and we would make a lot of those decisions together. But, now I don't really do a whole lot of that stuff. I basically just teach and a couple other things.

A more recent example can be found in the experiences of Barbara, who earned her administrative credential and headed up curriculum development for her school under a former principal. When a new principal was hired in 2012, however, Barbara was relieved of nearly all her administrative duties, despite her experience and certification in that area.

### Discussion

Although principals are increasingly turning to teachers and teacher leaders for assistance in quasi-administrative roles (Johnson & Donaldson, 2011; Margolis, 2012), the literature on these positions is scant—and even less is known about teachers who take on concurrent titles in administration. To expand the discourse on these positions, the phenomenological study here explored the perspectives of those who serve as teacher-APs. When the findings of this research are examined through both the lens of previous research and the theoretical framework established earlier, the experiences described by the participants above can be imagined as points on a continuum of possible teacher-AP interpretations. That is, each point might be envisioned as being situated somewhere between two poles of a purely faculty experience and an essentially administrator experience (see Figure 2). Each participant likely encountered his or her position uniquely and thus occupied an individual point along the continuum; however, grouping these experiences into the categories presented earlier allows a broader theoretical analysis, one that can facilitate the discussion of conjectures around the participation of teachers in administration.



*Figure 2.* Continuum of teacher-AP experiences.

### **Boundary Teachers**

The experiences described by the teacher-APs in the first category, boundary teachers, indicate an interpretation of the position that more closely approaches the faculty end of the spectrum. The experiences of these participants approximated those of both boundary spanners found in role theory and quasi-administrators in teacher leadership literature. Like boundary spanners, these teacher-APs described their job as consisting of a larger primary role in classroom instruction appended by a smaller secondary role in administration (Kahn et al., 1964). Despite their substantial reservoirs of teaching experience, these individuals were largely shut out by their principals from both the decision-making and policy implementation processes at their schools. The limited managerial roles of these boundary teachers allowed them to focus their work closely on teaching and helped reduce school overhead costs somewhat, but their experiences tended to reflect more closely those of an administrative assistant than an assistant administrator.

Furthermore, even though these individuals held official AP titles, their lack of authority and influence in administration contributed to particular problems (Kahn et al., 1964). Like other quasi-administrators (Finco, 2011; Shearer & Vogt, 2004), these boundary teachers were unable to meet the expectations of faculty who treated them as intermediaries and looked to them for advocacy on policy issues. Nor were the teacher-APs able to resolve the conflicts of loyalties that arose with their roles (however small or infrequent) in teacher supervision. Such instances of role ambiguity and conflict, coupled with a lack of involvement and influence within administration, may have contributed to these participants' overall sense of apathy toward the position, as well as their indifference to a possible future career in the principalship. From this perspective, the boundary teacher instantiation of the teacher-AP position offers few answers to the issues facing administration today.

### Boundary Administrators

Similar to boundary teachers, the participants classified in the second category of teacher-APs—boundary administrators—described their jobs along the lines of a boundary position; however, the experiences of these individuals might be understood as situated at the opposing end of the teacher-AP continuum. These individuals foregrounded their work as assistant principals and downplayed their roles and relationships within the faculty. Such an interpretation of the teacher-AP position responded to several of the exigencies encountered by current principals. Boundary administrators reportedly assumed many of the instructional leadership responsibilities expected of administration, particularly in taking up new reforms and assisting with accreditation. They served their principals as collaborators with whom to shape school policies, and kept budgets down by continuing to teach a significant portion of the day while only drawing a typical teacher's salary.

At the same time, however, these participants experienced many of the same problems confronted by boundary spanners and teacher leaders pulled into quasi-administrative roles: they lacked the formal authority and relational influence to hold teachers accountable to policies (Kahn et al., 1964; Perez & Dagen, 2011), and they recognized job overload in the dual demands of the position (Kahn et al., 1964; Shearer & Vogt, 2004). These factors were said to have contributed to the boundary administrator's lack of interest in advancing her career into the principalship. Thus, it appears that while this manifestation of the teacher-AP position addresses some of the issues facing principals today, the reports of powerlessness and overload associated with it raise questions about both its long-term viability and its potential for inspiring future career aspirations for the principalship.

### Player Managers

The third category of participants—player managers—identified closely with and reported substantial involvement in both faculty life and administration. Thus, their experiences might be situated between those of boundary teachers and boundary administrators along the continuum of teacher-AP interpretations. What seemed to most distinguish this group of participants from the former two is how player manager teacher-APs combined and mediated their two distinct roles, as well as the professional relations inherent in them. As administrators, these participants claimed to develop close relationships with their principals and take part in decisions to shape

school policies. Being only *assistant* principals, they did not have the principal's formal authority to enforce policy implementation through teacher sanctions or termination. Rather, they reported advocating for adoption of instructional reforms through the perceived legitimacy and teacher buy-in they gained in their faculty roles. For, as teachers, they had a "ground-level" view of what those policies looked like and entailed in the classroom, and as teacher leaders, they claimed to have developed collaborative, influential relationships with other classroom instructors. In essence, the two roles were seen as complementary: their perspective from the classroom helped inform principal decisions so that they were deemed fair to teachers, whereas their status as faculty leaders (who also had to implement those decisions) built the relationships and brought the credibility needed for school-wide adoption of instructional policies. Having the ability to shape their job and then carry it out, teacher-APs held positions that reflected those of player managers found in other organizational settings, such as doctors who practice medicine in and oversee general operations of hospitals (Augar & Palmer, 2002).

These individuals also resembled player managers in their perceived ability to facilitate communication and bridge the service-management (or in this case, faculty-administrator) divide (Augar & Palmer, 2002). When teacher colleagues asked for advocacy on policy issues, or principals requested help in drumming up support for ideas among the staff, these player managers did not interpret themselves as powerless intermediaries; instead, they claimed to be agentive liaisons between the faculty and the administration, conduits with the influence to reshape the messages they carried from one group to the other in order to bring about compromise and solutions, especially regarding the implementation of new instructional policies. In this way, the participants here saw themselves as "bridges" who could contribute to community by building consensus across school groups.

Thus, in comparison to the previous categories, the player manager manifestation of the teacher-AP position might offer the greatest affordances in relation to the needs facing principals today. Evidence here indicates that player managers see themselves as relieving principals of major administrative duties, assisting in the implementation of new instructional reforms, keeping salary costs down, and gaining experience and socialization in administration. At the same time, however, this interpretation of the job, as predicted in theory (Augar & Palmer, 2002), demands extraordinary commitments of time and energy. Such resources are easily exhausted when administrative responsibilities are numerous and administrators are few (Margolis, 2012). Thus, as

in the case of boundary administrators, questions remain about the practical feasibility of enlisting teacher-APs as player managers over the long term.

### **Themes across the Three Categories: Principals, Professional Stances, and Teacher Relations**

Analysis across the three groups of participant experiences underscores several issues that might begin to explain some of the variation among categories. In contrast to the theory cited earlier (Augar & Palmer, 2002), the participants in this study claimed that their official AP title itself had little bearing on what their job actually entailed. That is, simply holding the title of AP did not guarantee any particular degree of access to or inclusion in the authority and responsibility of administration, as indicated by the first group of participants. Rather, one of the most important factors in determining the shape, scope, and influence of the job was the school principal (Johnson & Donaldson, 2011). In their distribution of the number of leadership tasks, principals were perceived as having the largest impact on the job, particularly in distinguishing a participant's experience as a boundary teacher from that of a player manager or boundary administrator.

The other major determinants of this job, which seemed to separate the latter two categories of experience, consist of the teacher-AP's personal interpretation of the position and her or his relationships with the faculty. Boundary administrators, despite their involvement in classroom instruction, tended to view their jobs primarily in administrative terms, and their relationships with teachers were seen as more removed than those typically found within the faculty. Player managers, on the other hand, continued to see themselves as teachers, even after taking on major administrative roles, and their relationships with teachers were characterized as collegial if not friendly. It is also likely that in both cases the participants' professional stance and relationship with teachers influenced one another; that is, their view of administration might have led to close or distant relations with teachers, but these relations themselves might just as likely have supported or strengthened their professional stance as administrators.

### **Limitations and Implications**

As a phenomenological investigation, this study solely presents the perceptions of teacher-APs and is limited to a description of the job from the account of the participants themselves. Thus, the study did not explore how

other stakeholders (i.e., principals, teachers, etc.) viewed or experienced the work of those participants, nor did this investigation look into the impact of teacher-AP positions on measures of school success such as student achievement or attainment. Future investigation into teacher-APs might explore these issues, and thereby begin to understand the multiple factors involved in—and the effects associated with—this position. However, I argue that the perceptions of teacher-APs spotlighted in this investigation represent a critical and appropriate starting point, given the lack of research about this unique position. Such perceptions are especially valuable at a time when teacher leaders are being asked to consider a pathway to the principalship as a response to the nationwide shortage of administrators (Shumate, Munoz, & Winter, 2005).

Another limitation of this study might be located in its sampling. Although the participants involved in this investigation offered a wide and varied range of experiences in their professional tenure, school populations, and personal backgrounds, they each hailed from the same, single archdiocese, and do not comprise a nationally representative sample. Thus, the assertions proposed above should not be seen as generalizable to all teacher-APs; rather, the findings suggested here provide one possible framework for understanding the experiences of teacher-APs in Catholic elementary schools. At the same time, however, principals and educational leaders at the district or diocesan levels who recognize similarities between their own settings and those of the participants described above might consider the relevance of several implications of this research.

First, although not exclusive, the three categories of experiences suggested within the proposed framework represent some of the different interpretations and shapes that the teacher-AP position can take. The findings in this research also indicate that principals, to a great degree, can influence what the job looks like and how it responds to their needs and the needs of the school, and that their selection of candidates can bear a particularly important effect, especially in distinguishing the position as a boundary administrator or player manager. Because each manifestation of the job activates particular resources and challenges, principals must be especially intentional about their vision for the job and its purpose. They might consider what shape they hope the job will take and what administrative (and other school-wide) needs it will serve. Principals should also be deliberate in their selection of teacher-AP candidates, and might ask themselves: Do potential leaders exist among the current staff? Do those leaders have collegial and collaborative relations with



staff members? Are they comfortable moving fluidly between supervisory and peer relationships with teachers and principals, or do they prefer more stable, fixed relations? Are they willing and capable of taking on the extra administrative duties and the time required for them, and can they do so without detriment to their classroom instruction?

Second, leaders at the school and district/diocesan levels contemplating particular models of the teacher-AP position might take other matters into consideration as well. To avoid the conflicts encountered by the boundary teachers studied here, principals who are looking for assistance in managerial tasks without having to share decision-making processes might consider distributing these administrative responsibilities evenly among the faculty. Such an approach would obviate the creation of titles that often come with expectations of power or influence from others.

Third, principals in need of assistance on major administrative tasks might consider the use of a teacher-AP as boundary administrator or player manager. Such an interpretation of the teacher-AP position might afford these principals an opportunity to collaborate on the creation of policies, and, in the case of a player manager, this approach could lead to better consensus around and implementation of those policies. Before doing so, however, these principals might be advised to identify methods for determining the most equitable distribution of tasks in order to deter the burnout that can be experienced when teacher-APs become overburdened in their work. Additionally, principals looking for player manager teacher-APs might first ask themselves if they are comfortable having their communication and policy implementation mediated with the faculty.

Finally, district and diocesan leaders in search of potential candidates for the principalship might consider how they can foster more player manager instantiations of the teacher-AP job within their regions. Given that the player managers in this study represented the only category of participants who reported both interest and experience in higher levels of administration, perhaps this model represents a situated learning approach (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to developing new administrators. Targeted apprenticeships could partner teacher leaders with principals who can provide the supports needed for a player manager position. In addition, formal training in administration, perhaps through summer intensive programs, might complement the daily practical experiences these player managers could receive without overloading them during the school year. Options such as these might create an opportunity to develop the quality of future principals that are needed in today's Catholic schools.

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*J. Luciano Beltramo formerly served as a teacher-AP for Nativity Catholic School in South Los Angeles, and is currently completing his doctoral studies at the University of Southern California. His research areas of interest include teacher education, teacher leadership, student voice, and curricular standards and their enactment. He can be reached via email: [beltramo@usc.edu](mailto:beltramo@usc.edu).*