

The Assistant Principal as Instructional Leader: The Redesign of the AP Position in the 21st Century

Andrea F. Somoza-Norton

Natasha Aino Neumann

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, USA

ABSTRACT

Every campus leader is critical in supporting student achievement, most notably the principal and the often-unnoticed assistant principal (AP). The problem this study addresses is the lack of advancement in the AP's role as an instructional leader in light of educational reform and the demands of the 21st century. To address this issue, the purpose of this study was to mine the literature to understand the role of the AP. A semi-systematic review of the limited literature on this topic indicated the AP, whose role has historically been a manager and disciplinarian, must be redefined to reflect an instructional and equitable leader actively seeking to ensure access and opportunity for all students. These findings suggest that the AP should be duly prepared and supported as teaching, learning, and educational leadership continue to evolve in these extraordinary times. Based on a synthesis of the literature, we argue for a revision of the outdated AP role to one more reflective of increased awareness regarding instructional leadership, student diversity, equity, and access within the current educational environment of standards-based reform.

Keywords: assistant principal, co-principal, induction, instructional leadership, shared leadership

Instructional leadership is the ability of the school leader to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Despite the crucial role the assistant principal (AP) plays in school administration and improving student achievement, the literature has largely neglected to discuss the AP as an instructional leader. But the call for definition and elevation of the AP job to include instructional leadership is not new (NASSP, 1991). In light of heightened awareness of our educational systems' failure to support all students and the effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016), the time is ripe to revisit the role of the AP as an equitable instructional leader and highlight a new and essential dimension of the role for prospective and current APs, university programs, and school districts. The purpose of the study was to understand what the literature reveals about the AP role and in turn, to contrast the findings for this distinct introductory administrative position as instructional leader.

METHOD

A literature review was conducted to better understand the role and responsibilities of the AP. The methodology used to carry out this literature review entailed a semi-systematic review. This process is useful to identify how topics and research in specific fields have progressed over time (Snyder, 2019). A survey of educational databases published between 1999 and 2019 revealed only 33 documents focusing specifically on the AP role. Given the scant amount of literature on the AP, we also used terms such as school administrator, instructional leader, associate headmaster, co-principal, and aspiring school administrator. We employed general databases, including ProQuest, EBSCO, ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. A map of all peer-reviewed articles found on these databases was developed to group these sources by theme and better visualize literature gaps. After reviewing the sources describing the role of the AP, an emerging theme was the lack of formal, institutional definition for the role of instructional leader.

Review of the Literature

Kriekard and Norton (1980) and Norton and Kriekard (1987) point out that it is difficult to define the AP's role due to the lack of research on this topic. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) has recognized the importance of the AP's role, and in an effort to improve this position, they created the Assistant Principalship Task Force in 2008-2009 (NASSP, 2020). Although efforts have been made to clarify the importance of the AP position (NASSP, 1980), there is no consistent or well-defined AP job description. APs have voiced their frustration regarding this matter; the overall sense is that they feel like a "jack of all trades and master of none" (Weller & Weller, 2002, p.13). In contrast with the role of the AP (Glanz, 2004; Marshall, 1991; Scoggins, 1993), research on the school principal position is abundant (Fullan, 1997; Hallinger, 1996a, 1996b; Leithwood, 2000; Marzano et al., 2005). Hartzell (1993) confirms that the AP is an overlooked actor in practitioner literature; for instance, two major compendiums on educational administration, *The Handbook of Research on Educational Administration* (Boyan, 1988; Murphy & SeaShore-Louis, 1999) and *The Encyclopedia of School Administration and Supervision* (Gorton & Schneider, 1988), fail to mention APs all together (Hartzell, 1994). The acknowledged dearth of research about the AP (Hartzell, 1993; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Weller & Weller, 2002) is surprising given that the AP is considered by many to be the glue that holds many (if not most) schools together (Glanz, 2004; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). But while the AP is typically the entry-level administrative position, the teacher position is the training ground for school leadership, as the fledgling leader bridges teachers, staff, students, and families to upper management and leaders.

Unfortunately there is a lack of a clear description about precisely what the AP expectations are. While the literature reveals some definitions of the AP job, the role as liaisons does not align with the instructional leadership skills needed on campuses in the 21st century or job descriptions designed by human resources departments. The history of the AP position does shed light on why the role is so poorly defined. The job was initially created as a managerial, administrative function (Glanz, 2004). In the eyes of Weller and Weller (2002), the managerial function of APs has been reduced to "*liaisons* who are responsible to their supervisors and are held accountable for getting things done" (p. 30). The AP puts out fires and takes care of crises, and their daily 'to-do list' can change within a minute. Daily activities for APs are unpredictable and can range from unplanned staff absences, facility or transportation problems, and student and discipline difficulties (Hartzell, 1993).

One of the most notable studies on the AP role was the *Report of the Assistant Principalship*, a project supported by The National Association of Secondary School Principals, which gathered information from 1,127 APs and 1,207 principals in all fifty states (Austin & Brown, 1970). They found APs were tasked with "*school management*, a classification encompassing the day-to-day tasks related to running the school and providing for the physical necessities of the educational program" (Austin & Brown, 1970, p.31). In this study, the APs indicated pupil discipline was their most important responsibility, followed by pupil attendance, the master schedule, school policies, curriculum development, and teacher evaluation, while new teacher orientation was ranked low on the importance scale.

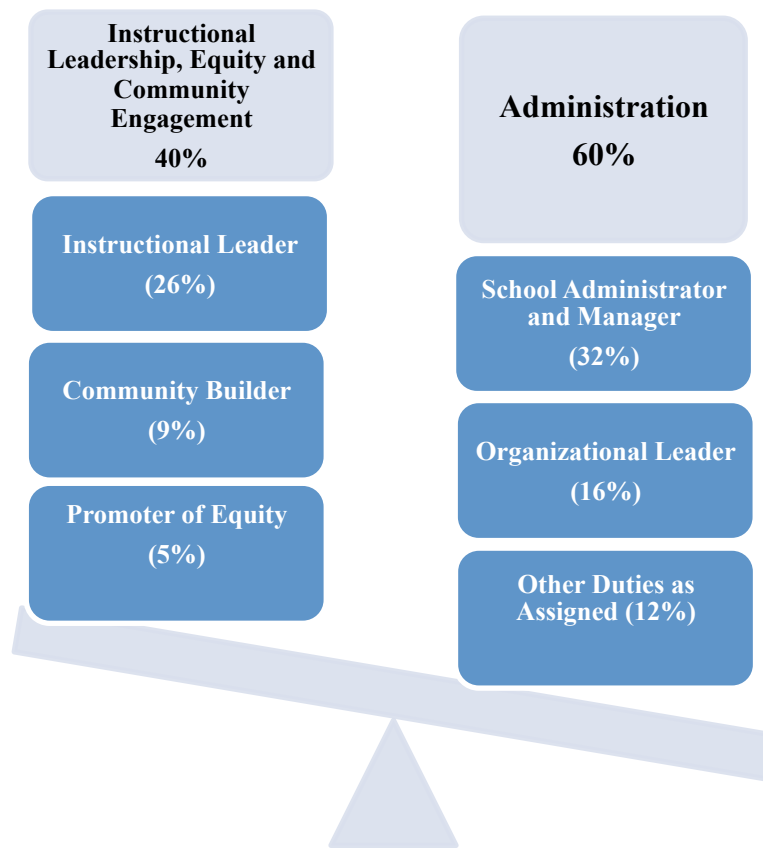
Several subsequent studies (Austin & Brown, 1972; Gorton, 1987; Mitchell, 1980; Reed & Himmler, 1985) agreed the primary responsibilities of APs were student discipline, student activities, and student attendance. For example, Pellicer and Stevenson (1991) found, "Student discipline is still the number one responsibility of high school assistant principals" (p. 61). Hassenpflug (1996) indicated that APs have three primary responsibilities: disciplining students, distributing textbooks, and supervising the cafeteria. In 2000, Weller and Weller interviewed 100 practicing APs from urban, rural, and suburban schools to find out what they do in their jobs. According to this study, "Approximately 77% of the respondents identified discipline and attendance as their major job assignments, whereas 13% indicated discipline or attendance were secondary to their primary responsibilities of improving instruction or overseeing the vocational education program" (Weller & Weller, 2002, p. 12).

Five decades have elapsed since Austin and Brown's 1970 report, yet the AP's duties and responsibilities have remained virtually unchanged; meanwhile, APs in 2020 are currently learning to be instructional leaders. Across K-12 schools, the three significant duties for APs continue to be student discipline, attendance, and student activities. Yet with a growing body of literature describing the effectiveness of culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa, 2020), student achievement accountability at the state and federal levels, and a heightened awareness of educational inequities, the AP's job description demands a closer look. Educational reform such as the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI, 2020) asks the AP to do more than keep the students "in line." Students are now expected to be career and college ready by graduation. As Marshall and Hooley (2006) explain, "Increased reforms leave assistants in new quandaries. APs, on the front line with students, faculty, and community members, cannot hide behind commission reports and clean new legislation" (p. 114). The dynamic aspects of the AP position must be made compatible with current educational reform

expectations of student access and achievement. For example, a content analysis study of 194 AP job descriptions obtained by the researcher from school district human resource staff in the state of Massachusetts showed that the function of *school administrator and manager* continued to be at the top of AP responsibilities, while *instructional leader* was ranked as secondary, and *promoter of equity* was designated to a minimal role (Somoza-Norton, 2012). Figure 1 illustrates a comparison of AP roles in job descriptions according to school districts' preferences (Somoza-Norton, 2012). This also mirrors the archetypal AP responsibilities exhibited in the literature. The figure emphasizes the importance in incorporating instructional leadership-driven tasks to produce more balanced AP job descriptions and de facto duties.

Figure 1

AP Job Descriptions According to Frequency and Preference (Somoza-Norton, 2012)



Note: Content analysis of assistant principals' job descriptions results shown by categories and school districts preferences. From *A Content Analysis of Assistant Principal's Job Descriptions in Massachusetts K-12 Public Schools* by Somoza-Norton, A. F., 2012. [Unpublished Ed.D. dissertation]. University of Massachusetts, Lowell.

EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Meeting the expectations of the standards-based reforms of the past decade necessitates that the role of the APs expands beyond the managerial duties of discipline and attendance to become equity-minded instructional leaders. Leadership is the ability to inspire others to achieve a set of objectives, whereas management is the capacity to supervise and direct others to achieve specific tasks (Avolio, 1991; Bass, 1990; Bennis, 2003; Burns, 1978). According to Wahlstrom (2004), "[L]eadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (Wallace Foundation, 2006, p. 5). However, as Elmore (2007) points out, "traditionally the status of educational administrators has been defined by their distance from instructional practice" (p. 517). Elmore stresses the importance of exercising instructional leadership for school administrators: "Everything should be anchored in the instructional core of schooling" (p. 517). Given the myriad of duties principals have, it is no surprise to find that many researchers believe meeting the educational expectations set out by standards-based reforms will require the role of the

APs to significantly shift to include goal setting and implementation relating to curriculum design, staff development, and especially instructional leadership (Glanz, 2004).

Gordon et al's (2006) literature review on school administrator instructional leadership reveals that a collegial model of supervision and an approach focused on teachers' developmental growth are the new paradigms in instructional leadership. This school leadership paradigm hinges on "understanding how teachers grow optimally in a supportive and challenging environment" (Gordon et al., 2016, p. 11). As a result, "the supervisor can plan the tasks of supervision to bring together organizational goals and teachers' needs into a single fluid entity" (p. 11). This collegial model of supervision expects school administrators to have certain prerequisite traits in order to facilitate collective instructional improvement—not just curriculum and instructional knowledge, but interpersonal and technical skills. The model calls for the supervisor to perform a range of tasks to improve student learning, including providing direct assistance to teachers, guiding professional development, and championing curriculum revision.

More than ever before, standards-based reforms informed by this model demand accountability for student performance (Elmore, 2006). Presently, school leaders have to follow specific standards of learning and give concrete proof of success; as a result, instructional leadership has re-emerged as a central component of increasing student achievement. As Lashaway (2002) indicates, "In the 1980s, 'instructional leadership' became the dominant paradigm for school leaders after researchers noticed that effective schools usually had principals who kept a high focus on curriculum and instruction" (p. 1). Similarly, Sergiovanni (2006) emphasizes that effective and supportive instructional programs are critically important to promote student learning and academic success. The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2015) codified the parameters for the successful performance of school leadership without distinguishing between the principal and AP. Clearly, school leadership is comprised of a team: principal and AP. As stated in Standard 4, "Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student's academic success and well-being" (p.4). Kaplan and Owings' (1999) early suggestion is now widespread: The expectations of the AP role now include having strong instructional leadership skills through mentoring and analysis of school data.

PRINCIPALS, APS, AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

If APs are expected to have strong instructional leadership skills, what does that entail? One of the most comprehensive definitions is rendered by Bush and Glover (2002):

Instructional leadership focuses on teaching and learning and on the behaviour of teachers in working with students. The leader's influence is targeted at student learning via teachers. The emphasis is on the direction and impact of influence rather than the influence process itself (2002, p. 10).

Instructional leadership, in other words, is the ability of the school leader to improve the quality of teaching and learning going on at their school. Robinson et al. (2008) reported that a robust capacity for shared instructional leadership combined with transformational leadership traits is a strong predictor of the academic quality of student achievement in math and social studies in schools. As part of the school administration, APs find themselves increasingly tasked with an instructional leadership role by their principals, but not necessarily with the training and foundation to be successful.

One of the few studies on the AP's role as an instructional leader found that the principal's discretion to assign instructional leadership activities to their assistants is influential in their success (Celikten, 2001). Marshall (1991) noted that the AP is a position that lacks status and power, almost entirely depending on the principal's delegation of duties. Boyer (1991) also feels that principals are instrumental in choosing which tasks and responsibilities APs must accomplish. Pellicer and Stevenson (1991) claim that the principal and the AP ought to work together to develop appropriate duties to fit their school's needs, rather than principals simply assigning undesirable tasks they do not want to complete. Several researchers concur (Gorton, 1987; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; McIntyre, 1988; Rodrick, 1986) that the principal is vital to the improvement of the assistant principalship. The principal is ultimately responsible for increasing the AP's available time to engage in developing professional effectiveness around instructional leadership.

Yet Celikten's 2001 study also shows APs are continually inhibited in instructional leadership by a lack of role descriptions for the position and by being asked to perform a wide range of duties unrelated to instruction. As Kaplan and Owings (1999) argue, "A principal's role now moves beyond management activities to cultivating new leaders to accept part of the challenges of school improvement and student achievement. In this new context, APs can become key agents in schools' shared instructional leadership" (p. 81). Kaplan and Owings add that APs can be valuable resources in creating an

environment that supports higher student achievement. A more explicit acknowledgment of this critical element in the role APs perform in schools is needed.

One model that could bridge the role of the AP as an instructional leader is the co-principal model seen in some California schools and supported by the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA, 2020). Outside of California, the literature shows countries like Sweden exploring models of shared leadership to bolster the skills of newer administrators while sharing the load of all school site duties. Döös et al. (2017) described the model as successful at reducing professional isolation and decreasing the burden of leadership. They argue to reevaluate the notion of one “superprincipal” in charge of all managerial aspects of a school, including instructional leadership. A formalized definition of shared leadership in the co-principal model may increase the AP's instructional leadership skills while lessening the load of a sole principal.

PREPARING AND SUPPORTING THE AP FOR INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

The AP's role in instructional leadership provides the starting point for the evolution of the role in the 21st century. Some initial attempts have been made to better define instructional leadership with the AP in mind. Reitzug et al. (2008) studied twenty principals' attitudes and behaviors regarding improved instruction and increased student learning and achievement. Four instructional leadership concepts emerged from their data that APs aspiring to take on instructional leadership roles should attend to. The first, *relational*, describes fostering relationships to create a healthy school culture, eventually leading to an increase in student achievement. The second, *linear*, describes actions and linkages between curricular/instructional components and student test achievement. The third, *organic*, includes actions that encourage analysis and conversation about teaching and learning, such as peer walk-throughs and action research. The fourth concept, *prophetic*, describes a collective moral vision as a school community. To complement and successfully engage in instructional leadership, school leaders, including the AP, must also promote a campus climate inclusive of underrepresented students (Khalifa et al., 2016). Khalifa (2020) urges school leaders to commit to anti-oppressiveness publicly and practice critical self-reflection. A leader raises questions of purpose, changes policies to include and provide access for all students and is vigilant to respond to the school community's needs (Khalifa, 2020).

Similarly, Craft et al. (2016) cite Hausman et al. (2002) and report, "one of the most commonly cited traits of successful APs was the ability to build and maintain positive relationships which was linked to fostering a positive school climate" (p.10). DeWitt (2020) urges a more holistic approach to instructional leadership, encouraging leaders to incorporate social-emotional learning practices to positively impact student learning and behavior. In their new expanded role, the AP would benefit from focused and supportive professional development in the areas of social-emotional learning as well as culturally responsive school leadership (CSRL) (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Another area school principals could leverage their APs with respect to instructional leadership is diversity and inclusion. Given their managerial background, APs are positioned to champion culturally responsive teaching practices and coordinate with community organizations to better serve students as instructional leaders. Lindsey et al. (2003) suggest that culturally proficient school leaders assess their cultural values and their effects in the school environment. Ideally, the school leader values diversity and welcomes diverse groups of learners, manages the dynamics of differences and recognizes that conflicts are part of life, adapts to diversity and continues to enhance staff awareness on multicultural issues, and institutionalizes cultural knowledge so that policies and practices are in keeping with equity and diversity. APs can create these opportunities by reviewing implicit messages that may be hidden in the curriculum, classroom interactions, or instructional techniques (Bennett deMarras & LeCompte, 1999).

Riehl (2000) speaks of three classes of tasks necessary for educational administrators like APs to address diversity in their schools: fostering new meanings about diversity, promoting inclusive practices within schools, and building connections between schools and communities. States like California have codified these ideas in their California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSEL), outlining a *description of practice* as well as a *developmental continuum of practice* with the end goal of preparing ethical, equity-driven, instructional leaders. The CPSEL acknowledges administrators and leaders must be equipped to serve in multiple roles, including manager, community leader, policymaker, and culturally responsive school leaders (Khalifa et al., 2016). When it comes to instructional leadership, the AP is explicitly tasked with taking a lead role in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Table 1 shows the CPSEL and the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) side-by-side comparison. The standards were aligned to indicate the parallels that exist between these two sets of documents. Both sets of standards call for instructional leadership and equity. The state standards and the nationally recognized PSEL should serve as a guide to appraise the AP role and responsibilities in the 21st century.

Table 1

A Comparison of CPSEL and PSEL

Theme	CPSEL	PSEL
Mission, Vision and Values	Standard 1: Development and Implementation of a Shared Vision Education. Leaders facilitate the development and implementation of a shared vision of learning and growth of all students.	Standard 1: Mission, Vision and Core Values. Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student.
Instructional Leadership	Standard 2: Instructional Leadership. Education. Leaders shape a collaborative culture of teaching and learning, informed by professional standards and focused on student and professional growth.	Standard 4: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Management	Standard 3: Management and Learning Environment Education. Leaders manage the organization to cultivate a safe and productive learning and working environment.	Standard 6: Professional Capacity of the School Personnel. Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student's academic success and well-being. Standard 7: Professional Community of Teachers and Staff. Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being. Standard 9: Operations and Management. Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Community Engagement	Standard 4: Family and Community Engagement Education. Leaders collaborate with families and other stakeholders to address diverse student and community interests and mobilize community resources.	Standard 5: Community of Care and Support for Students. Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student. Standard 8: Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community. Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Ethics	Standard 5: Ethics and Integrity Education. Leaders make decisions, model, and behave in ways that demonstrate professionalism, ethics, integrity, justice, and equity and hold staff to the same standard.	Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms. Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Equity, Cultural Context and Policy	Standard 6: External Context and Policy Education. Leaders influence political, social, economic, legal, and cultural contexts affecting education to improve education policies and practices.	Standard 3: Equity and Cultural Responsiveness. Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being. Standard 10: School Improvement. Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Note: Source Commission on Teacher Credentialing & California Department of Education. (2014). *California Professional Standards for Education Leaders (CPSEL)*. Sacramento, CA: Authors.; National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015). *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015*. Reston, VA: Author.

A supportive bridge is needed in order for any AP to grow into a successful instructional leader. Three of the biggest challenges that new APs face, according to Craft et al. (2016), are trust building, conflict management, and distanced friendships. Having a coach or mentor can alleviate some of these challenges. Several states like California require induction programs for all administrative positions that include coaching or mentoring (CTC, 2020). Additionally, Craft et al. (2016) found that new APs sought informal mentors from peer administrators. Despite advanced degrees and state certifications, APs in their 2016 article felt they lacked confidence in day-to-day decision-making. In addition to formal

coaching, an established and supportive induction program operating from an instructional leadership framework could alleviate some of the uncertainties of a new AP and further prepare the new administrator for a long career in educational leadership as an effective instructional leader.

CONCLUSION

As noted in the literature review, there is extensive research on the principal position; conversely, the research on the AP is scarce. Over the last 50 years, the perception of the AP job and its roles and responsibilities has not changed significantly. In many school districts, the top three job duties continue to be student discipline, attendance, and activities. Yet, as we examine the current needs of students and families in light of an awareness of systems of oppression and educational reforms, it is critical to revise the role of AP as a just, instructional leader. We can no longer afford to squander the talents of APs by trapping them in the antiquated realm of the “three b’s”: behavior, busses, and books.

APs need to be made accountable for continuous school improvement and student achievement. Leaving the AP position unchanged in a time of high accountability, online learning, and growing needs of diverse communities is a misuse of resources and potential. Accordingly, their roles and responsibilities should reflect those instructed by key descriptors from professional standards and principles. AP roles and responsibilities in job descriptions must correspond to the accountability expectations of the communities they serve. A job description rewrite and a reimagined role will grow the opportunities for APs to become less of disciplinarians and more of equitable instructional leaders desperately needed in schools today.

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ANDREA F. SOMOZA-NORTON, Ed.D., is an Assistant Professor in the MA and Preliminary Administrative Services Credential, Educational Leadership and Administration Program in the School of Education at California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo. Her research interest is K-12 educational leadership, in particular, leadership and the impact of climate change on education, the integration of technology and data science for equitable outcomes, and bilingual teachers' professional development. Email: asomozan@calpoly.edu

NATASHA AINO NEUMANN, Ed.D., is an Assistant Professor in the MA and Preliminary Administrative Services Credential, Educational Leadership and Administration Program in the School of Education at California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo. Her areas of research interest are leadership for equity, specifically for emerging bilinguals in K-12 education, the development of dual language immersion programs in school districts, and the preparation, recruitment, and retention of bilingual teachers to support multilingual programs in K-12 education. Email: naneuman@calpoly.edu

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