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Complexities in the Roles of Reading Specialists

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Abstract

As public schools have changed, so have the roles of reading specialists who work within schools. This article describes the findings of a study that examined the challenges of 12 reading specialists from elementary to high school level in both urban and rural schools. The researchers found that reading specialists work in a variety of instructional models, and their roles are misunderstood by administrators and classroom teachers. Additionally, they have limited contact with parents and deal with behavior problems from students, but are not necessarily provided with support systems for dealing with many of the complexities inherent in their work.

Keywords: Reading specialist, Reading recovery model, Support system, Challenges

1. Introduction

In 2003, the International Reading Association published a position statement identifying three major roles for reading specialists: instruction, assessment, and leadership. These three roles are changing with seemingly more emphasis on the leadership aspect of the position. For example, reading specialists provide resources and guidance to classroom teachers by co-teaching in regular classrooms, modeling effective literacy practices for teachers, providing and conducting assessments, planning instructional activities, conducting professional development, supervising paraprofessionals, developing language arts curricula, and facilitating teacher study groups (Dole, 2004; Shaw, Smith, Chester, & Romeo, 2005). As the role expectations for reading specialists have changed, these professionals have been assigned additional responsibilities, sometimes without preparation or training (Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003; Klein & Lanning, 2004). It is reasonable to assume that reading specialists experience challenges as they take on new roles and responsibilities in complex school and district-wide settings.

Current challenges of reading specialists may be closely tied to state and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements that have led to a strong public school emphasis on reading achievement as measured by tests. The expanding roles of reading specialists are in flux as schools struggle to meet the literacy needs of both teachers and learners accordingly. The roles of reading specialists can include leadership on curriculum writing teams, administering school-wide assessment initiatives, providing staff development, mentoring new teachers, managing teams of paraprofessionals, working with teachers as literacy coaches to help improve the literacy instruction in the classroom, and leading Response to Intervention for individual students (Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Shelton, & Wallis, 2002; Klein & Lanning, 2004; Mraz, Algozzine, Watson, 2008; Quatroche, Bean, & Hamilton, 2001).

A brief historical review is helpful in understanding the current complexities in the lives of reading specialists. The first widespread appearance of reading specialists occurred following the authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1966. This was the federal government's first significant involvement in public education and gave rise to much controversy, since the Constitution of the United States gives the authority to control public education to the states. One of the components of ESEA was Title I, which provided funds for supplemental reading instruction to schools with higher numbers of low-income students.

The regulations stated that Title I funds were to be used to supplement classroom reading instruction. School districts interpreted supplemental instruction to involve removing students from regular classrooms; thus, "pullout" reading instruction was commonplace. This federal program targeted struggling readers for additional support. Ideally, struggling readers who had difficulty decoding text, had poor metacognitive and comprehension skills, and could not effectively apply comprehension strategies (Hall, 2005) would be provided "extra" reading instruction in small group settings in the context of a classroom assigned to a reading specialist for approximately 30 minutes daily. However, Title I reading instruction commonly became the *only* service for these students, actually replacing regular classroom instruction

(Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989). For struggling readers, literacy instruction was fragmented and much more limited than what had been intended by Title I. Annual testing in Title I demonstrated that struggling readers were falling further and further behind. Pull-out Title I programs did not meet expectations for remediation in reading (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989).

In an effort to strengthen schools in general, particularly programs for disadvantaged students, the federal government instituted the Reading Excellence Act of 1997 and then the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. These policies required that schools implement reading instruction and teaching methods based on systematic, scientifically researched strategies. In addition, these policies mandated new standards for defining highly qualified teachers and called for all teachers, including reading specialists, be highly qualified (Edmondson, 2004).

No Child Left Behind includes three important regulations intended to improve reading instruction that place additional pressures on schools and classroom teachers. Firstly, all teachers are required to be highly qualified; that is, all teachers are required to be fully certified in their respective subject/teaching areas.

Secondly, NCLB requires that all reading strategies and programs used in the school systems be based on significant research and demonstrated to be effective. States are required to design detailed strategic plans to meet the needs of struggling readers while simultaneously ensuring that reading specialists provide support and professional development for classroom teachers of reading.

Thirdly, all teachers are to use assessments to monitor student progress and direct further reading instruction in their classrooms. The states are to implement annual reading assessments for children in grades 3-8 and once for children in grades 10-12. All children are to be assessed regardless of academic ability. These state-mandated reading assessments must align with state standards for reading and measure levels of proficiency (Block & Israel, 2005).

Currently, there are schools where students are achieving higher than expected levels of literacy performance, given their student demographics. Reading specialists at these schools where children seem to “beat the odds” indicate that they had a variety of roles and responsibilities (Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003). In previous studies reading specialists reported that they regularly provided specialized instruction for struggling readers, served as a resource to classroom teachers, and administered and scored literacy assessments. With less frequency, they engaged in planning with teachers, co-taught, selected reading materials, worked with other school professionals, coordinated the reading program, developed curricula, participated in school-based study teams, met with parents, guided the work of paraprofessionals and volunteers, coordinated book clubs, facilitated teacher research, and conducted professional staff development activities (Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003; Commeyras & DeGroff, 1998). Reading specialists are also being used to train paraprofessionals to work with struggling readers (Cobb, 2007). The reading specialists in exemplary schools demonstrated enthusiasm for their work and were highly committed to providing effective literacy instruction to their students and support for their schools (Bean,

Swan, & Knaub, 2003).

It is clear that reading specialists are being given additional responsibilities with increasing frequency (Bean, Trovato, & Hamilton, 1995; Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Shelton, & Wallis, 2002). These responsibilities vary widely since school administrators, classroom teachers, and reading specialists all have varying perceptions of the roles that reading specialists should play in schools (Quatroche & Wepner, 2008). Some reading specialists report frustration and confusion associated with new responsibilities, and while they feel prepared to meet these leadership role requirements, they do not feel prepared or comfortable in these roles (Bean, Trovato, & Hamilton, 1995).

Because of ongoing changes in the role of the reading specialist in schools, it is reasonable to assume that reading specialists are facing new challenges and complexities, and they may have different needs from the reading specialists of the past. Thus, this project was designed to address the research question, "What are the current challenges, dilemmas, and needs of reading specialists?"

2. Methodology

A qualitative research design was selected because our purpose was to explore the experiences, perspectives, and perceptions of reading specialists. A phenomenological approach was used to interview reading specialists in order to recount and create meaning of their experiences through collaboration with the researcher (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). Phenomenological interviews were used because our goal was to provide an emic perspective through the use of context-based, personal approaches to data collection and analysis.

2.1 Participants

The participants in the study were 12 reading specialists teaching in urban, suburban, and rural contexts in a southern state in the United States. The criteria for participation in the study were that the participant hold a reading endorsement and serve in the role of a reading specialist in his or her current school. We selected three specific types of reading specialists; Reading Recovery teachers, Title I reading specialists, and school-based reading specialists. All Reading Recovery teachers are required to complete a year-long training program and attend ongoing professional development (Clay, 1993; Reynolds & Wheldall, 2007). These teachers then work one-on-one with primary-aged children during daily 30-minute sessions (Reynolds & Wheldall, 2007). The sessions include research-based reading remediation instruction as designed by Marie Clay (Clay, 1993). Title I reading specialists serve children in low socio-economic (SES) schools that have high percentages of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (Gupta & Oboler, 2001; Kim & Sunderman, 2005). These reading specialists are funded through the federal government's NCLB initiative. The word of these teachers is centered on children who are reading below grade level in low SES schools. The federal government requires that these teachers hold a bachelor's degree and be fully certified to teach reading or are actively working toward certification in their respective state (Gupta & Oboler, 2001). School-based reading specialists are funded through their respective school

districts and meet the requirements in their respective states. The state in which all of the participants worked requires a basic teaching license in addition to the reading endorsement certification. All reading specialists in the state are required have taught in the classroom for a minimum of three years and hold a graduate degree in reading from a state-approved institution (VDOE, 2010). School-based reading specialists are appointed by each school's principal based on qualifications and educational background and are assigned duties based on the needs of the schools as determined by the administrator.

All of the participants served in the role of reading specialists in their schools. Ten of the teachers worked in elementary schools and two worked in secondary schools. One of the teachers worked as a Reading Recovery teacher, and another participant worked in a Reading Recovery model, although not formally a Reading Recovery Teacher. More than half of the participants worked in Title I school settings. All of the participants held the state's reading endorsement. The group included experienced teachers, with all having worked as teachers between 5 and 35 years.

2.2 Interviews

Through phenomenological interviews, the participants were asked to recount and ascribe meaning to their experiences as reading specialists. We were interested in their perceptions related to their experiences as reading specialists. The phenomenon under investigation was the challenges faced by people in professional roles that are currently evolving as the needs of school divisions and children change. Our goal was to determine the routine of reading specialists in their daily work with struggling readers, other teachers, school administrators, and parents. We also sought to determine what challenges or dilemmas they were facing with each of these populations. While these topics were initiated by the researchers, the interviews were semi-structured and driven by the dialogue. The interview dialogue was driven by both the phenomenon and the interview. Meaning is derived as the researcher and the participant act as co-researchers to make sense of the phenomenon under investigation. The questions served facilitative purposes (Pollio, et. al., 1997).

The interviews were conducted in public school contexts, in the rooms assigned to the reading specialists or in a university setting for the convenience of the participants. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and they were audiotaped. The participants selected their pseudonyms.

2.3 Data Analysis

All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researchers repeatedly read the interview transcripts to obtain a sense of the information contained and the themes that were prevalent in several interviews. Each transcript was segmented into units of meaning or statements focusing on and describing specific themes using the approaches for segmentation and categorization described by Hycner (1985) and Seidman (1991). Careful attention was given to the preservation of context within units of meaning, and individual units were double-coded when they contained information relative to multiple categories. The researchers used a six-analysis process for the analysis of phenomenological data (von

Eckartsberg, 1986). This is an analytical procedure that involves recursive reading, segmenting, categorization, identification of themes, and searches for units of meaning that instantiate and diverges from the initial categorizations. After repeated readings of the transcripts, the researchers created preliminary categories for the interview data. The next step involved the reduction of vague and overlapping data from the participants into concrete categories. The third step centered on the elimination of transcript elements viewed as irrelevant in that they were not found more than once across the transcripts. The initial three steps led to the fourth step in von Eckartsberg's procedure which is hypothetical identification. At this stage, the researchers focused on identifying and describing the feelings and emotions expressed by the participants. At that point, the researchers examined the categories in which grouped units of meeting had been compiled and identified overall themes. This procedure resulted in an identification of the experiences of reading specialists based upon the participants' descriptions.

The guiding interview questions centered on the challenges, needs, and dilemmas faced by reading specialists related to working with students, other teachers, administrators, and parents. Because each of the reading specialists discussed work with students, teachers, administrators, and parents, these groupings shaped the overall themes, with subcategories identified for each of these categories. Each theme is discussed in our reporting of findings.

3. Findings

The themes identified in the data included: (a) what reading specialists do, (b) challenges and needs related to working with students, (b) challenges and needs related to working with teachers, (c) challenges and needs related to working with administrators, and (d) challenges and needs related to working with parents.

3.1 What reading specialists do?

There was much variety in kinds of job assignments for the reading specialists in this study. The majority of these reading specialists were Title I teachers, with some working in: (a) Reading Recovery or Reading Recovery-based programs, (b) inclusion classroom settings, (c) combination pull-out and inclusion models, and (d) secondary reading specialists working collaboratively with teachers in inclusion settings and teaching whole groups of readers.

3.1.1 Reading Recovery and Reading Recovery-based models

Two of the reading specialists described themselves as Reading Recovery teachers who worked with students individually once a day in a pull-out model. For example, Josey talked about her position in a program based upon the tenets of Reading Recovery:

> I am pulling four fourth graders one-on-one out for 30 minutes each, administering a Reading Recovery lesson with that child. I do spend one day a week when I do a pull-out group with the students who were formerly in the Reading Recovery program … I do another pull-out group of Reading Recovery students who discontinued the first round this year, but were very borderline. Sometimes … I am working with a whole group of them in a classroom modeling a lesson or teaching the

> focus lesson in the first-grade classroom.

Ms. Read, a Reading Recovery teacher in a different school, also spoke about her work with Reading Recovery students.

> Well, I do teach Reading Recovery, which is one-on-one, and it's a very fast-paced program so I have 20 weeks to get my students on grade level and that's what I am working on right now … I just work with first-graders.

Although Josey facilitated a modified Reading Recovery program, she and Ms. Read both identified themselves as Reading Recovery teachers and followed Clay's (1993) model.

3.1.2 Inclusion models

Some teachers taught primarily in regular classroom settings and did not pull students out of their classrooms. School divisions in the state actively employ inclusion models for special needs students. Idol (2006) defined inclusion as a program designed to educate children with academic or behavioral needs in the regular age-appropriate classroom with his or her peers for the entire school day. Another teacher (in this case, a reading specialist) worked with the classroom teachers to provide special services for struggling readers. In inclusion models, struggling readers were never pulled from the regular classroom, but the reading specialists sometimes worked with small groups of children in a particular area of the classroom.

3.1.3 Combination pull-out and inclusion models

Several teachers worked in regular classroom contexts and also pulled individual students out of their classrooms for other lessons. For example, Carol had been given the assignment of working with all of the fourth and fifth graders in her school with a focus on writing improvement for the purpose of improving essay writing for a state mandated test. She said,

> An average day for me has my time divided into one-hour blocks for teaching writing. I am teaching writing in all the fifth-grade classrooms and all the fourth-grade classrooms. That's eleven classrooms. I teach one hour in fifth grade; I teach for thirty minutes twice a week in fourth grade. So, I will have several blocks of one hour where I am teaching writing.

There were also time periods in which Carol pulled small groups of students out of their classrooms for reading support.

3.1.4 Providing support to classroom teachers

Five of the teachers indicated that they occasionally spent time teaching demonstration lessons to model specific strategies or methods for classroom teachers. Josey said, "My last hour of the day was spent in a third-grade classroom helping the third-grade teacher set up a reading workshop block." S.L. stated, "I might be spending some time modeling a lesson in a classroom. We have this reading program that was handed out to the teachers and I spent a lot of time going out and modeling a lesson in the classrooms."

Not all of these reading specialists were working in the traditional model of supporting small groups of struggling readers in a pull-out model. The Reading Recovery teachers were using pull-out with either individual or small groups of children. However, others were working with children in inclusion models within the children's regular classroom. There were also participants who worked in a combination of models or who provided literacy instructional support to classroom teachers.

3.2 Challenges related to working with students

3.2.1 Challenges related to reading levels

Several of the teachers working with students in pull-out situations discussed the difficulty of working with a wide range of abilities at one time. They reported that it was a struggle to meet the needs of students at different levels. For example, Hally stated, "It's just hard trying to meet the needs of all of the children who are on such different reading levels." Zoe, a high school reading specialist, had similar challenges.

3.2.2 Behavior and discipline

There was much discussion of problem behaviors in students. These participants reported dealing with students identified as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). These teachers indicated that the behaviors of these students affected the attention and ultimately the behavior of all of the students in the group. For instance, Melanie stated,

> My only challenges right now are a student who is very ADHD, so he has trouble focusing on my lesson and then it affects other people in the group. There is another student that I just have major concerns about. We don't really do any kind of formal testing for special education until third grade, and so I have a student who has been a repeater before, and at this point in second grade he is still struggling to learn letter names and sounds and put them together … He's definitely a challenge.

The participants faced frustration in dealing with behavior problems while trying to provide literacy instruction. They believed that the students' behavioral disorders and their frustrations with their limited abilities hindered adequate preparation of children for state mandated tests. Student behavior remained a problem for the participants in the study.

3.2.3 State mandated testing challenges

At one point in every interview, all of the teachers brought up the needs to prepare students for state mandated tests. The tests presented frustrations for most reading specialists. One participant simply saw test preparation as a part of her job. Another stated that her school's success or failure on the tests determined her job responsibilities.

Zoe, who felt that preparation for state mandated tests served to reduce reading to task-oriented activities, made a representative statement:

> It's the least favorite part of my job. I feel like it's a waste of my energy. I feel like it's frustrating and nerve wracking; not just for the students, but for me. My stomach

> is in knots over one student because I don't know if she's going to be able to graduate this year. And so, you know, we worked together literally for the last two weeks, five periods a day. I don't know if she's going to make it. I feel like the worst part of my job is having to torture students with [state mandated test] questions where they read poetry and, instead of enjoying poetry for poetry's sake, they are forced to answer multiple-choice questions about poems – which is not the reason poetry is written.

Not all of the participants had difficulties preparing students for these tests. Carol stated:

> I haven't really had dilemmas or issues. I think the administrators here in the building are very focused on doing everything that needs to be done to get them through the [state mandated] tests. I don't have a problem with that. If a teacher has a problem with them, then they have an issue with the administration. It's not that the [state mandated] test is everything, but it is a standard that we have to rise to. My professional opinion is we just have to get those kids ready and get them through the [state mandated] test. They just have to pass it. That's our job. We need to teach them what they need to know to take the test. So, I guess I am playing on the team. It could be different if I didn't want to play on the team, but I do.

Students' results on state mandated tests sometimes determined how the reading specialists were used in the schools. In failing schools, test scores were used to identify needs for remediation when students were in danger of failure. State mandated test scores were not used in this way in schools where students were doing well on these tests. Joleen stated:

> I think that's why, right now, my position is very ambiguous because we have met our goals, and until there's a problem with us meeting our goals and not making the scores we need to make as far as English or reading or other content areas, I think that's when I will be called on more. That's when the alarm will go off that we need to have something more in place.

State mandated testing sometimes impacted the roles of the reading specialists in a significant way. Some specialists faced frustration with it, while others viewed the preparation of students for the tests as an intrinsic part of their job.

3.3 Challenges related to working with teachers

All of the reading specialists indicated that they worked with other teachers in their schools in different capacities as literacy teachers. The teachers indicated that they worked easily with some teachers and had challenges with others. Specific challenges included: (a) roles as specialists in reading who were expected to work with and in support of classroom teachers with less literacy training, (b) the expectation of teachers that reading specialists would have instant and successful recommendations for solving problems, (c) working with teachers who did not understand the roles of reading specialists, (d) working with resistant teachers, and (e) working with teachers who left the classroom or did other tasks when the reading specialist came in or teachers who did not want the reading specialist in their classrooms. The reading specialists also spoke about skills needed for reading specialists to successfully work with teachers including: (a) collaborative planning, (b) accepting the rule that the classroom

teacher is always right, (c) expecting that it will take time to form good working relationships with teachers, (d) planning to spend time organizing space, (e) having resources and ideas for teachers, (e) understanding that diplomacy goes both ways, and (f) accepting baby steps.

3.3.1 Difficulties encountered in working with teachers

By far, the most common problem experienced by these reading specialists was that they viewed themselves in juxtaposed roles with regard to the roles of classroom teachers. They all knew the "rule" that "the classroom teacher is always right," and this perception was mentioned in almost every interview. The reading specialists had internal conflicts when teachers were using literacy instruction practices that the reading specialists did not consider to be particularly helpful for developing readers. Further, the reading specialists were sometimes asked by the classroom teachers to engage in literacy instruction practices that they perceived as inappropriate for the learners. Yet, they felt that they had to avoid conflict and do what was being asked. In some cases, the reading specialists stated that they had been placed in a role similar to that of a paraprofessional. Again, the teachers were conflicted. They knew that they were well-trained literacy teachers, while in almost all cases, the classroom teachers with whom they worked did not have specialized training in reading/literacy. Representative statements included:

- I pretty much work on whichever of those things the teacher wants. If the teacher wants me to work on this skill, I can certainly do that. If the teacher has a particular thing they want me to do, I do it.
- Depending on the teacher, you don't always have the opportunity to do that [what you believe should be done]. So the teacher kind of says, do this, and if you want to be in that classroom, you kind of have to bend to their classroom setup.

Not being asked or allowed to use personal literacy teaching expertise was a common challenge for every participant who worked with children in the context of a regular classroom.

A different challenge was that of classroom teachers who asked for advice and expected reading specialists to have an immediate answer to the problem. For instance, Melanie said, "A teacher comes and wants a problem fixed immediately, in regard to a student. And they think the reading specialist has a bag of tricks from which to choose."

High school reading specialists faced the problem of working with teachers who did not understand the roles of reading specialists. Joleen said, "A lot of the teachers believe, you know, these kids should know how to read already, and they don't necessarily understand why I am there in the school helping these kids." These teachers had difficulty establishing supportive roles in working with content area teachers.

Many participants indicated that they worked with resistant teachers. While they were required to work with these teachers, they sought other solutions such as focusing on the teachers who welcomed their assistance. For instance, S.L. said:

> I have had some teachers be resistant either actively or passively to working with me from very early in the year, and I very quickly changed my outlook from, you know, working with everyone, to focusing particularly on teachers who were asking for support, because there were enough people asking for my support and help and my collaboration, that I made the decision. It wasn't worth the stress and anxiety. It was causing me to turn on those teachers who were being resistant and kind of engaging in a power struggle that I didn't even see was there. My strategy of backing off has somewhat seemed to work recently in that the team's kind of coming around and are a little bit more cohesive.

The participants believed that their roles were ambiguous in the eyes of classroom teachers. Although the reading specialists saw themselves as far more qualified than classroom teachers in the area of literacy instruction, they felt as though they had to yield to the classroom teachers' preferences. They stated that their roles were misunderstood. These reading specialists also faced the dichotomous situations of teachers wanting instant answers to their literacy questions and others who demonstrated no interest in working with them at all. The participants continued to seek methods of appeasing classroom teachers while remaining steadfast to best literacy practices.

3.4 Challenges related to working with administrators

The participants reported challenges relating to their work with administrators at both school and district levels. There was a lack of clarity in administrative understandings about the role of a reading specialist in a school. The reading specialists have also reported dilemmas with the reading programs adopted by various schools and districts, as well as issues with state mandated tests that all students needed to pass. Finally, specialists mentioned the limited background of administrators in literacy education and meeting the needs of struggling learners.

Administrators used the services of reading specialists in a variety of ways that sometimes made their roles unclear. Carol said that she and other reading specialists in her district were called upon to disseminate information from the central office to teachers in the schools. She stated, "For example, we have new reading cards here, and we were responsible for getting those and getting them out to the teachers and sort of telling them how these cards are to be handled."

Melanie stated that she was assigned a variety of tasks including facilitating various literacy activities for the entire school. She expressed a level of satisfaction with her role in the school as she stated, "I think what's comfortable, from what I have observed, is the administration does not micromanage the reading specialists. In fact, the administration doesn't make the reading specialists do all these other coverages of clubs or study halls other activities." However, her job responsibilities included "other duties as assigned" which made her role "ambiguous" and difficult to define. It was a challenge to keep her role in the school consistent.

Joleen reported experiencing similar feelings of ambiguity in her role as a reading specialist in a high school. Ironically, the instability in her role stemmed from the success of the students in her school on reading tests. She stated,

> I think that's why right now my position is very ambiguous because we have met ourgoals, and until there's a problem with us meeting our goals and not making the scores we need to make as far as in English or reading or other content areas, I think that's when I will be called on more. That's when the alarm will go off that we need to have something more in place.

In addition to lack of clarity with the roles of reading specialists in schools, the participants reported feeling frustrated about not be able to influence the selection of materials or the reading programs to be used in classrooms. Although Cindy felt supported by her administrator, she recalled a situation in which she was at odds with the classroom teachers:

> There was just one instance, but it was kind of what I heard. There was an instructional decision made by the fifth-grade team that I strongly disagreed with, but I only heard second hand because I don't work closely with those teachers. I disagreed with her [the principal's] position of kind of saying nothing. She was saying 'okay,' and I didn't think it was a sound instructional decision.

The precise role of reading specialists remained an issue in their dealings with school and district level administrators. They struggled with administrators who did not know best how to use them or who had a limited understanding of literacy instruction. These administrators were unable to or unwilling to provide support when the reading specialists were in conflict with classroom teachers. The participants also sometimes disagreed with decisions made by administrators in terms of instructional materials and state mandated tests. The ambiguity in their roles was tied to the lack of clear understandings on the part of administrators.

3.5 Challenges related to working with parents

The reading specialists in this study had some challenges related to working with parents. Because they did not have as much interaction with parents as classroom teachers, their work with parents was of a different nature. The participants expressed concerns about gaining and maintaining contact with parents, the level of parental involvement, and working with parents who do not speak English. The reading specialists found all of these situations challenging and tried different methods to remedy the situations.

3.5.1 Contact with parents

Communication with parents was limited for these reading specialists, although they all recognized the need for more contact with parents. As Joleen stated, "I haven't worked with parents that much at this school. It's more with the students and other teachers than with parents or the community at this point." The need for communication with parents was apparent among the participants. Melanie felt that it was important that she meet and maintain communication with the parents of her students. She stated, "I think that it is helpful when reading specialists are introduced in various classes. I think the reading specialist is

valuable in helping out with special ed. meetings and child study meetings and communicating about reading."

Parent conferences were considered to be an important vehicle for parents and reading specialists to communicate. However, these reading specialists were seldom invited by classroom teachers to be involved in parent conferences. While this can be considered a challenge related to working with teachers, the direct impact was to limit contact between reading specialists and parents. As Carol stated:

> I sort of waited to be invited to conferences this year, but looking back to when I was a classroom teacher, I didn't invite people to my conferences. I have once or twice with a really low level kid or a parent I thought was going to be troublesome, asked someone to sit in (on conferences), but for the most part, you just meet with parents as a classroom teacher. So, I think next year, I really want to be on the ball and for all of my kids that I am pulling. I really want to say to the teachers, 'When you have that report card conference, I really would like to sit in. I would like to meet the parent. I would like to have some input.' I would like to be there and talk to them.

Other participants had similar concerns about their levels of contact with parents.

Josey had attempted to inform parents about the Reading Recovery program. She stated:

> As a reading teacher, I don't talk with parents or work with parents nearly as much as I did as a classroom teacher. With Reading Recovery, I do contact the parents at the beginning of the program. I do try to contact them at some point in the middle of the program to let them know how their child is doing and then again at the end of the program. When I say contact, I was referring to phone calls. We do send home a letter at the beginning to get parent permission to participate in Reading Recovery and we let them know, at the end of the program, the child's status, and that's in our formal letter. In the first-grade classroom that I am working with, I did attend some of the parent/teacher conferences with the teacher.

3.5.2 Involving parents in supporting reading progress

The reading specialists struggled with maintaining contact with the parents. It was, therefore, not surprising that they had comparable challenges in getting the parents involved in the education of their children. With parents failing to follow up at home, the reading specialists felt that they were left carrying the burden for the reading achievement of the children. For instance, Josey stated:

> Some of the challenges in terms of Reading Recovery is that maybe the parents aren't following through on reading the books with children at home. Reading the books; part of their homework is that they cut up sentences they need to put together and there are some parents who are great about doing that every night. And then there are some parents who don't read with them at all.

Mrs. Read also has difficulty with parental involvement. She stated:

> I am working with the lowest children. A lot of times the parents won't do their part at home. They have to do homework every night and read with the children and work on sentences. A lot of times, they won't do that … Sometimes, I get along fairly well with the parents. You have got to know the parents before you can work with the children and they have got to trust you and have confidence in order to get the support that you need.

The differences in languages spoken at home and at school also hindered some reading specialists from adequately commutating with parents when parents who spoke a first language other than English. Melanie said:

> There isn't a lot of practice at home with English, so they are not going to get those additional skills … the challenges are to communicate with parents that are of different nationalities. I think that will always be a concern. On a positive note, our school does have a Spanish transition teacher, or should I say liaison, and this liaison helps to communicate on a daily basis with our parents that are from a Spanish background. So, I think that's the biggest concern with parents.

The challenges of reading specialists in working with parents were primarily gaining and maintaining contact with them, the level of parental involvement, and communication problems. Through the use of strategies such as home visits, barbecues, and language liaisons, these reading specialists were seeking innovative methods to address challenges related to working with parents.

4. Discussion

According to the International Reading Association (2003), the primary responsibilities of reading specialists in public schools center on instruction, assessment, and leadership. The twelve reading specialists in this study indicated that they understood their roles as having these three components, but found it difficult to do what they felt was necessary within these three realms in their individual contexts. Their primary challenges were those of defining their roles and promoting literacy practices for their students. Similarly, the predominant need identified by these reading teachers was that of establishing their roles in the eyes of teachers, parents, and administrators.

While there were no notable differences between the challenges of reading specialists in urban and rural settings, there were unique teaching roles for the participants. The elementary school reading specialists worked in pull-out models, inclusion models, and combinations of both models. Reading Recovery or comparable early intervention models were also used. The work of reading specialists was closely tied to providing support for student success on state mandated tests. As Bean et al. (2003) found, attempting to meet NCLB requirements places the role of reading specialists in a constant state of flux. Interestingly, for these reading specialists, roles became even more ambiguous when schools met standards. Administrators and classroom teachers viewed reading specialists as an additional resource to help children pass state mandated tests. For schools that successfully achieved this goal, there was uncertainty about what reading specialists were expected to do. In these cases, reading

specialists were given additional responsibilities for which they were not prepared (Bean, et. al., 2003; Klein & Lanning, 2004).

Administrators could alleviate these issues by having clearly defined responsibilities for reading specialists. However, the predominant dilemma encountered by the reading specialists with administrators was a lack of understanding of their work and their role in the school. These roles were uniquely tied to the specific needs of each school. The data provided evidence of the need for common conceptions of the roles of reading specialists in schools among administrators.

Classroom teachers equally misunderstood reading specialists' roles. This was a multifaceted dilemma for secondary-level reading specialists. The participants felt that their level of proficiency in literacy instruction should have given them the authority to do what they thought best for their students. As Bean et. al. (2003) found, reading specialists in exemplary schools take the lead with classroom teachers and serve as literacy coaches. However, some of the participants felt that classroom teachers saw them in roles comparable to those of paraprofessionals. They felt that it was necessary to yield to the requests of the classroom teachers; otherwise, they needed to find ways work completely independent of the teachers.

The secondary-level reading specialists worked exclusively in pull-out models, therefore their collaboration with classroom teachers ranged from limited to non-existent. Frustrations in working with classroom teachers were underscored by lack of support from administrators. Without administrative support, the reading specialists felt that they had no choice other than to comply with teachers' requests at the elementary level or work completely independent of classroom teachers at the secondary level. While classroom teachers did not understand the best methods to help support literacy learners, they were also reluctant to seek help from the reading specialists. It was common for classroom teachers to either want quick answers to their questions or to want nothing to do with the reading specialists.

Reading specialists can be a wasted resource if classroom teachers and administrators fail to utilize all of the knowledge and skills brought to schools by these educators. As the data revealed, the training of reading specialists has equipped them with a wealth of literacy knowledge beyond that of classroom teachers. For reading specialists to provide expert literacy support for students, it is essential that classroom teachers value the role of reading specialists and view them as resources and allies in the effort to support all readers. Reading specialists need more collaboration opportunities, support systems, and meeting time with classroom teachers. Such opportunities could broaden the view of classroom teachers toward reading specialists. The opportunity for successful collaboration opportunities between reading specialists and classroom teachers is most likely if buttressed with support and encouragement from administrators. Administrative support remains a crucial need for reading specialists.

These reading specialists also felt a lack of support from parents. Adequate communication had not been established with parents and some participants had worked on the development of methods of gaining and maintaining contact with parents. They sent letters home and called parents, but their level of contact never reached the level that the classroom teachers

had with the parents. They also had difficulties getting parents involved in the literacy education of the children. The reading specialists expressed concern about parents following up at home. This was a central component of Reading Recovery and several other intervention programs.

The participants indicated that they were unintentionally excluded from parent conferences. Conferences could be arranged to include the reading specialists. Such opportunities would open the lines of communication with the classroom teacher and the parents and allow for a team effort including reading specialists. Without communication, it was difficult to get parents involved. Parents can be informed about the role that reading specialists play in schools and make use of opportunities for follow-up literacy activities outside of school. This was another area where administrative support could be used to foster collaborative relationships between parents and reading specialists. There is no reason that reading specialists should not have as much access to parents as classroom teachers enjoy.

The participants also struggled with meeting the needs of their students. The primary student-related challenge for secondary reading specialists was fostering reading enjoyment with adolescent-aged children. They sought to alleviate these problems by making their instruction student-centered and attempting to foster the joy of reading with their students. These reading specialists were hindered when students did not see the relevance of reading or when instruction had to be tailored to the state mandated tests. The students became frustrated when asked to read material that was beyond their reading level. This created a dilemma for the reading specialists, since they wanted to their students to enjoy reading as well as pass tests. A greater level of autonomy could benefit reading specialists in designing and implementing instruction to meet the needs of developing readers. They would then be free to design lessons that would engage their students and foster the joy of reading. Autonomy was a primary need of the reading specialists.

The elementary reading specialists struggled with student behaviors and with finding the most appropriate instructional materials for their students. They reported working with students with ADHD and other behavioral disorders. These teachers also reported that they were expected to use instructional materials that were above the reading levels of their students. This challenge was rooted in the pressure to assure that students passed mandated grade-level tests. The focus was shifted away from genuine reading development of these children to preparation of the children for passing tests. Given that the elementary reading specialists worked in different types of instructional models, it is difficult to suggest one method to deal with these issues. Reading specialists in inclusion models in elementary schools do not have the liberty to set classrooms discipline policies, nor can they use alternative instructional materials. Those who worked exclusively in pull-out models had slightly more autonomy, but the limited time afforded with the students hindered how much they were able to accomplish. This was especially evident when instructional time was used to correct discipline problems.

The data revealed implications for university-based programs as well. Participants recommended that reading specialist candidates shadow an in-service reading specialist

comparable to the student teaching internships for classroom teachers. Activities of this kind could provide candidates with an insight into the daily evolving roles of reading specialists. The participants also recommended that university programs provide future reading specialists with an explicit understanding of the reading standards required by their respective states. As schools are using reading specialists exclusively to work with children who either failed or are at risk of failing state-mandated tests, it is important for reading specialists to clearly understand what is expected of students. This will lead reading specialists to diagnose the specific problems and use instructional strategies that will benefit each student. Additionally, it would be helpful for university programs to prepare reading specialists for the variety of instructional models in which they may work. The participants revealed that they work in pull-out models, inclusion models, and combinations of both. Reading specialist candidates can be prepared for any possible instructional models and address effective strategies for challenges related to work with students, classroom teachers, administrators, and parents in a variety of situations.

The strongest implication for reading specialist preparation programs was for training reading specialists to take on leadership roles in their schools. Quatroche and Wepner (2008) reported that leadership components are lacking from programs designed to train reading specialists and literacy coaches. Although these reading specialists understood that they were expected to be literacy learning leaders in their schools, they did not have the knowledge and skills for taking on genuine leadership roles. Their struggles with classroom teachers, administrators, and parents could have been addressed if the reading specialists had come into their positions with strong leadership skills for communicating with others and providing support in varying teaching contexts. When they experienced challenges like teachers who were reluctant to work with reading specialists, rather than dealing directly with the problem from a leadership perspective, the reading specialists just worked silently in those classrooms or focused their attention on classrooms where they felt more welcomed. As recommended by Quatroche and Wepner (2008), teacher education programs for reading specialists need to include leadership development that will prepare literacy professionals to address challenges they will face in the schools. Further, there is a need for the development of leadership and communication skills in practicing reading specialists.

The challenges of reading specialists have changed over the last ten years, and the primary issue for the participants in this study was that of having an undefined role in the school. As their roles are changing, administrators, teachers, parents, and students expect a variety of services from reading specialists. Further research is needed to examine the specific relationships that reading specialists have with each of these parties. Future researchers may also explore the best strategies for providing reading specialists with the support they need for working with administrators, parents, teachers, and students. Further research might also consider the discrete components of university programs and the current preparation that reading specialists are receiving to interact with each party. This research could lead to improved university and school district programs to provide reading specialists with the knowledge and skills they have to have effectively work with all educators and parents involved in supporting literacy learning for struggling readers.

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