The Roles of Middle and High School Reading Specialists

Kathleen M. Stolfi

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The Roles of Middle and High School Reading Specialists

By

Kathleen M. Stolfi

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education of the State University of New York College at Brockport in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degrees of Master of Science

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By Kathleen M. Stolfi

APPROVED BY:

[Signatures and dates]
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Chapter One: Introduction

My research question, how do reading specialists negotiate their roles with content area teachers, emerged from my personal experience working with a reading specialist who shared with me that most content area teachers she had approached were not receptive to her and the resources she could provide. In addition, based upon my own understanding, literacy instruction in primarily English language arts classrooms now includes subject specific content areas such as math, science and social studies.

Alvermann, Swafford and Montero (2004) stated that “integrating literacy into the content areas is critical to support learning in democratic classrooms where life experiences are valued” (p. 193). In a democratic classroom, collaboration is essential and requires all participants—content area teachers, reading specialists, students, parents and administrators—to work in concert to ensure academic success.

Significance of the Problem

The main goal of The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 is to hold school districts accountable to close the achievement gap. One way in which the NCLB is ensuring accountability is by requiring school districts to seek better qualified and prepared classroom teachers and well-prepared reading specialists who can serve as coaches or mentors for teachers in the schools. The United States Department of Education defines highly qualified teachers as teachers who have 1) a
bachelor's degree, 2) full state certification or licensure, and 3) prove that they know each subject they teach

Purpose

The roles of elementary reading specialists and their impact on literacy instruction at the primary and elementary levels have been widely researched (Bean, et al., 2002). The role of secondary reading specialists has been less researched and perhaps more importantly, less explicitly outlined by school district personal and administrators. This lack of articulation makes the job of secondary reading specialists more difficult as they often face resistance from content area teachers who have been trained to focus on teaching the content material and already face considerable pressure to increase their students understanding of the material. From the content area teachers' perspective, it is not their responsibility to teach literacy skills in their content area classrooms. The purpose of my research, then, is to better understand how secondary reading specialists negotiate their role while working with content area specialists.

The role of the reading specialist has been defined by the 2006 International Reading Association (www.reading.org). They state that reading specialists should fulfill the following roles:

1) **Collaborators**-content area literacy coaches are skilled collaborators who function effectively in middle school and/or high school settings.
2) **Coaches**—content area literacy coaches are skilled instructional coaches for secondary teachers in the core content areas of English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

3) **Evaluators**—content area literacy coaches are skilled evaluators of literacy needs within various subject areas and are able to collaborate with secondary school leadership teams and teachers to interpret and use assessment data to inform instruction.

4) **Instructional Strategists**—middle and high school teachers who are skilled in developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in the specific content area.

**Rationale**

My experiences as a classroom English teacher led me to wonder how reading specialists negotiate their role with content area teachers. In my ELA classroom, collaborating with the reading specialist was a natural and welcomed experience. When I was struggling with how to address specific students’ need, the reading specialist would come into the classroom and model several research-based strategies. My reading specialist would then check in with me to see how these new approaches were working.

One time, I remember being approached by my team’s science teacher who inquired as to how she could best support a particular student in her classroom who was struggling to read and understand the content area material. I suggested she
adjust her current pairings of students based on interest level and ability. I also recommended that she seek out the assistance of the reading specialist.

For this study, I solicited data from four reading specialists through the use of an on-line survey containing a series of statements and questions developed by Blamey and Meyer and Walpole (2008/2009) and based upon the International Reading Associations 2006 Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches.

According to Manzo, Manzo and Thomas (2005), “organizations of all types, including schools, are now being assessed in terms of “bottom line” effectiveness. For schools this means higher test scores, lower drop out rates, improved school attendance and increased parental satisfaction” (p. 364). So why doesn’t the social arena support this push? There are several reasons for this: reluctance on the part of content area teachers, lack of professional training for content area teachers, lack of support by administration, lack of sufficient team planning and meeting time.

**Study Approach**

My research study is primarily a quantitative online survey of four reading specialists from western New York. It is from the results of the survey that I hope to learn how middle and high school reading specialists negotiate their roles with content area teachers. Because limited research exists in regard to middle and high school reading specialists and their interactions with content area teachers, I believe this to be the best approach to data collection.

A quantitative look at the roles and to what extent reading specialists work with content specialist and in content area classrooms is critical when considering the
roles that reading specialists routinely perform versus the recommendations as presented by the 2006 International Reading Association (www.reading.org).

Examining how reading specialists collaborate with content area teachers and to what extent reading specialists fulfill the suggested roles as recommended by the International Reading Association will enable me to begin to understand how reading specialists negotiate their role with content area teachers.
Chapter Two: Review of Literature

I begin this literature review with a historical overview of how reading specialists have been implemented into the school environment. I then turn to examine the various roles and responsibilities that are placed on reading specialists by school districts and professional organizations. I further proceed with an examination of literature that details the challenges and the difficulties that reading specialists and content area specialists face in their day-to-day work. I conclude with a closer examination into what literacy looks like in science, math, social studies and technologies.

The Historical Development of Reading Specialists

According to Bean (2004), the use of reading specialist dates back to the 1930’s when their primary function was supervision of teachers to improve the reading program. In this supervisory role, the reading specialists observed teachers instructing their students and then offered suggestions to improve instruction.

After World War II, criticism from the general public about the public schools, specifically, teachers inability to teach students to read, led to the addition of remedial reading teachers to the faculties of public and private elementary and secondary schools. It was then that the primary responsibility of reading specialist shifted to working with individual or small groups of students who were learning to read.
In 1968, the International Reading Association (IRA) created guidelines for reading specialists, which strongly supported the remedial role of the specialist, in fact five of the six functions described for the “special teacher of reading related directly to instructional responsibilities” (p. 2). However, Bean and Wilson (1981) found factors such as funding that have restricted the roles that reading specialists assume. According to Bean and Wilson monies generated through Title 1 of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) served as the primary source of funding. “This act has been reauthorized every five years since its enactment. The current reauthorization of ESEA is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001” http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html.

Specifically, funding from the original ESEA Act was to be used to purchase materials and resources to support students who were economically deprived. Reading specialists were required to work only with the designated students and could only use the purchased resources just for this student population. As a result, the pull out policy was enacted to only pull out the segregated student population into large, separate distinct programs (Bean, 2004).

Initially, the pull-out programs did not work due to a lack of alignment between the instruction occurring in the reading specialists’ classroom and the instruction in the English general education classroom (Bean, 2004). According to Bean and Wilson (2004), a shift occurred in 1988 when collaboration between classroom teachers and reading specialists became a common practice within the classroom. These changes included the additional collaboration among classroom
teachers and special educators with more emphasis on reading specialists working in the classroom alongside the classroom teacher.

In 1995, the IRA established a commission to investigate the role and status of reading specialists. Bean, Cassidy, et al. (2002) reported on the National Survey of Reading Specialists. The completed questionnaire was returned by 1,517 individuals who defined themselves as reading specialists. The specialists identified the following capacities and qualities that they believed characterize the ideal reading specialist:

1) Teaching Ability
2) Knowledge of reading instruction.
3) Sensitivity to children with reading difficulties.
4) Knowledge of assessments.
5) Ability and willingness to fill an advocacy role.

The National Reading Panel Report (2002) was prompted by the position statement entitled *Teaching All Children to Read: The Roles of the Reading Specialist* (IRA, 2000), which called for reading specialists to apply their expertise in assessment, instruction and leadership. One of the disturbing findings of the survey was the absence of men and minority groups, among the reading specialist population. This was seen as problematic as there were limited role models for students from this group of professionals (Bean, 2004).

A study in 2003 by Bean, Swan and Knaub provided a brief glimpse into how administrators viewed reading specialists. This study was conducted in two stages:
In Stage 1

three different sets of school were identified: schools that had received recognition from the International Reading Association as having exemplary reading programs (1996-199), schools that had been identified as having an exemplary Title I reading program (1994-1998), and schools that had achieved distinction because they had “beaten the odds” or performed at levels higher than expected, given student demographics. The data set consisted of 111 schools from across the United States. The 19-item survey that was sent to the principals of the 111 schools included three sections: a request for demographic data, for information as to whether the school had reading specialist and the “perceived” importance of that specialist, and for the principals’ perceptions about the functions or tasks of the reading specialists in their schools. Principals responded to multiple-choice items and to a Likert scale item asking them to indicate the frequency with which reading specialists performed various tasks (p. 447).

Stage 1 results

they received 58 responses (52 percent return) in which 39 schools indicated that they employed reading specialists. Over 97 percent of the principals in schools that had reading specialists stated that the reading specialists were important or very important to the success of the reading program. As to what the reading specialists do, according
to the principals, reading specialists performed many different tasks, from working with student to performing leadership roles in the schools. Results indicated that the most frequent tasks of reading specialists performed on average more than several times a week were instruction, diagnosis, and serving as a resource to teachers (p. 477).

In Stage 2

the researchers talked with the reading specialists in the schools to get a more complete description of what they did to promote reading performance of students. A 24-item structured interview protocol was designed to obtain detailed information about how reading specialists functioned. A large percentage of the questions focused on the following five leadership tasks identified through Stage 1: serving as a resource to teachers, developing curriculum, coordinating the reading program, selecting or identifying reading material, and providing professional development. Nine of the 12 specialists interviewed worked in schools identified as exemplary by the International Reading Association, two worked in schools recognized by Title I, and one worked in a school identified as “beating the odds.” The participants came from a variety of school settings, representing urban (42 percent), suburban (42 percent), and rural schools (16 percent). The school populations ranged from 100 to 1,000 students. The results indicated that the “reading specialists were involved in five broad
Principals in the exemplary schools were extremely positive about the importance role reading specialists played in the success of the reading program. Although significant, knowledge about the role of reading specialists in schools with exemplary programs is insufficiently robust. There is little information about reading specialists entering and performing their roles in schools without exemplary reading programs. This is a major concern because it is highly probable that more reading specialists will be assigned to schools without exemplary reading programs than assigned to schools with them.

**Current Roles and Responsibilities of Reading Specialists**

In 2006, The International Reading Association (www.reading.org) stated that reading specialist should fulfill the following roles:

1) **Collaborators**- content area literacy coaches are skilled collaborators who function effectively in middle school and/or high school settings.

2) **Coaches**- content area literacy coaches are skilled instructional coaches for secondary teachers in the core content areas of English Language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

3) **Evaluators**- content area literacy coaches are skilled evaluators of literacy needs within various subject areas and are able to collaborate with
secondary school leadership teams and teachers to interpret and use assessment data to inform instruction.

4) Instructional Strategists- middle and high school teachers who are skilled in developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in the specific content area.

Based on the 2006 IRA Standards for Middle and High School literacy coaches, Blamey, Meyer and Walpole (2008/2009) conducted a national survey of middle and high school literacy coaches in which they examined the actual roles and responsibilities of practicing reading specialists.

The researchers first conducted a small pilot study before collecting data through a web-based national survey of practicing middle school and high school coaches in the Fall of 2006. One hundred forty-seven of 433 literacy specialists, (a return rate of 33 percent), identified their educational background, teaching experience, coaching, preparation and their roles and responsibilities. Based on the survey results, the researchers determined that 48 percent of the participants had reading specialists certification, 40 percent reported having a master’s degree in literacy and 94 percent reported undergraduate degrees in one of three areas: English, elementary education or an area outside of education. Seventy-six percent of participants reported being certified in their respective states, 54 percent had coaching preparation and 74 percent indicated that their roles, were undefined by their school districts. In regard to teaching experience, the findings indicate that, on average, participants had 13 years reading specialist experience, with some having taught previously in a content area. According to the findings, 62 percent of the participants
performed in the role of collaborator, 46 percent as coach, and 27 percent worked in the role of evaluator.

According to Blamey, Meyer and Walpole (2008/2009) results of coaching preparation, the study measured the specific preparation that participants underwent prior to becoming and while serving as a literacy coach. The top three activities were: district-level professional development with 74 percent of the respondents reporting this to be the most helpful to their development. The second activity graduate-level coursework with 71 percent of the respondents reporting this to be most helpful. The third and final activity was professional reading with 69 percent of the respondents stating this activity being the most helpful. According to Blamey, Meyer and Walpole report the top three Roles and Responsibilities; collaborator, coach and evaluator.

Collaborator

As collaborators they reported the top three activities listed were one; respected confidentiality with 87 percent characterize this as evident of collaboration. The second activity was the examination of best practices with 86 percent characterizing this as evidence. The third and final activity was examined curriculum materials with 86 percent providing this as evident of collaboration.

Coach

According to Blamey, Meyer and Walpole (2008/2009), their role of coach was achieved through specific activities. Three top three were: worked with teachers.
individually with 72 percent characterizing this as evidence of coaching. The second activity reported was assisting teachers in instruction of content area texts with 66 percent characterizing this as evidence of coaching. The third and final activity reported was working with teaching teams with 62 percent reporting this as evidence of coaching.

**Evaluator**

The respondents reported evaluator as the third role and responsibilities they are currently engaged. The top three activities respondents felt fulfilled their role as evaluator were: reviewed assessment research with 48 percent providing this as evidence of evaluator. The next activity was helping teachers standardize scoring of writing with 33 percent as evidence of evaluator. The third and final activity was helping teachers determine which strategies support achievement with 31 percent reporting this as evidence of their responsibility as evaluator.

**Difficulties Faced by Reading Specialists**

The respondents offered advice for designees of Professional development. According to Blamey, Meyer and Walpole(2008/2009), “participants discussed the importance of having time to network with other literacy coaches, commenting on the necessity of common time to plan and discuss new research-based concepts” (p. 321). Secondly, “participants described the need for professional development focusing specifically on strengthening coaches’ research-based knowledge of literacy strategies, content area literacy instruction and effective adult learning techniques” (p.
Lastly, "participants suggested that professional developers should also focus on practical knowledge, practical knowledge included not only techniques in time management and organization for the coaches but also concrete/easily transferable teaching ideas that the coaches could model for their teachers" (p. 322).

In addition, participants’ report that their roles and responsibilities remain relatively ambiguous at the school- and district level. As a result, many secondary coaches expend a great deal of energy trying to create an identity. Because of the vague nature of the role, a range of preparedness exists among the current coaches. It is suggested that school administrators could facilitate the work of coaches by providing concrete exceptions and discussing how they see the work of coaches as supporting professional development efforts. Moreover, policymakers, could develop clearer descriptions for coaches so that all stakeholders know that to expect when a literacy coach begins work. (p. 322)

Also, often reading specialists and content area specialists do not have clearly defined and supported academic programs. This lack of articulation has created a more challenging form of collaboration makes it difficult to assess the progress of students (Bean, 2004).
that

content area specialists held specific assumptions: must cover their subject matter in a timely, accurate and effective manner; believe that textbooks are necessary for teaching and learning content; and tend to assume that students at the middle and high school level come prepared to read and learn strategically when they enter their content area classroom. These assumptions influence teachers’ instructional decision making; their use of a textbook, and their perceptions of active and independent readers. (p. 36)

Miller, Ward-Murray, and Harder (1994)

believe content area teachers come to the classroom as experts in their field and want to share this information with their students. However, content area teachers realize that students find the textbooks too difficult, dislike reading, and have difficulty expressing their thinking clearly in writing. In addition, content area teachers are such experts in the learning of their content that they forgot the reading and study skills they used to obtain their expertise. (p. 2)

According to Olson and Truxaw (2009), “content teachers may feel poorly qualified to teach using content area literacy approaches, further reducing the likelihood of their use” (p. 423). Also, Olson and Truxaw state “content area literacy
is seen by preservice teachers as a literacy approach secondary rather than central to teaching and learning in the content areas” (p. 423).

Olson and Truxam (2009) conducted a study based on discursive metaknowledge and content area literacy. According to the researchers, the participants were thirteen science and eleven mathematics preservice teachers in the senior year of a five-year teacher education program completed a semester-long science and mathematics teaching methods course taught by the authors. These secondary preservice teachers were concurrently taking a practicum in local middle and high schools. The content methods course precedes a semester long student teaching experience. (p. 425)

The assignment was to investigate how secondary school students made sense of traditional literacy practices compared with online literacy practices. To scaffold the preservice teacher’s abilities to productively investigate the student literacy practices we modeled using the tasks during the methods class. The data and analysis was drawn upon the 24 preservice teachers’ analysis papers and the researchers own reflective notes and memos written as they conducted their work.

Olson and Truxam (2009) found that the preservice teachers saw how students engaged with the tasks dialogically, but also they saw that, for some students facility with one task did not mean facility with the other. That is, some were adept at reading the traditional text and yet demonstrated difficulty in reading on the Internet and vice versa. Overall, the researchers found that
students needed to develop a more robust set of Internet reading comprehension strategies. (p. 429)

Lastly, Olson and Truxaw state a basic challenge facing content area literacy instruction has been to convince preservice teachers that literacy belongs in the content classrooms. The researchers further state that “if students who cannot learn what the teacher teaches it will continue their pattern of failure in school and add to the great pool of people in the United States who will remain either unemployed or in low paying, unskilled jobs” (p.3). Miller, Ward-Murray and Harder (1995) stated that “[content area] teachers assume that students have all their reading and language arts skills in place” (p. 3). The reality is that students will enter and exit the content area classrooms with a wide range of reading abilities and study skills necessary to complete the assignments. Also, students come to the classroom with vast ethnic and cultural diverse backgrounds with many students who are learning English as their second language and need continuous support in all content areas to comprehend and read and write successfully. In addition, according to Miller, Ward-Murray and Harder (1995) these learners need educators “who strive to understand their culture and the characteristics they bring to the classroom” (p. 3). They provide several suggestions for content area teachers:

1) Look at the material they want to teach and decide what skills students will need in order to learn this information.

2) Teach the process while teaching the content. Teachers simply have forgotten that they already possess the skills they need to teach their students as they themselves are active, critical readers” (p. 23).
Literacy in the Content Areas

Literacy and Science

Literacy, according to Olson and Truxaw (2009), is central to learning science and mathematics, and teachers of science and mathematics can better teach their students if they understand literacy’s role in learning. Gillis-Ridgeway and MacDougall (2007) discussed the current thinking of most science teachers: reading is a passive activity while science is hands on. However, with the evolution of the learning cycle developed independently in science education and reading education researchers came to view the acquisition of reading and science skills to be the same when viewed through a learning cycle model. Specifically, the Science Learning Cycle Model by Karplus (1994) and the learning cycle model in reading by Barton and Jordan (2001). Gillis-Ridgeway and MacDougall compared Karplus’s to Barton and Jordan’s learning cycles and found comparative strategies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Science Learning Cycle Model (Karplus, 1994)</th>
<th>Learning Cycle Model in Reading (Barton &amp; Jordan, 2001)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exploration</strong></td>
<td><strong>Preactive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students get ready to learn new concepts through activities</td>
<td>Student prepare for learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concept Invention</strong></td>
<td><strong>Interactive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Builds on exploration-involves information input</td>
<td>Guided learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Application/Reflection</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reflective</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students apply newly constructed concepts to novel problems and solutions</td>
<td>Transform and personalize information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to Gillis-Ridgeway and MacDougall (2007), “using learning cycles when designing lessons will activate the cognitive process in which learners actively construct their knowledge in a transaction with the text” (p. 45). The researchers provided science teachers with examples of strategies they could use in multiple settings. One way to do so is by incorporating classroom strategies that activate, and engage students in thinking, talking, reading and writing about science such as: hands-on activities guiding and scaffolding through discussion of the results of scientific exploration or reading. Other strategies would be brainstorming and mapping responses, generating questions, use of anticipation guides, teacher created graphic organizers and previewing the text to be read.

Olson and Truxam (2009) emphasize the need to build more powerful connections between literacy approaches and disciplinary content instruction in order to improve the learning opportunities for adolescent learners. But despite the consensus about literacy’s importance to teaching and learning in the content areas, secondary preservice teacher are often dismissive of efforts to incorporate practices that focus explicitly on literacy. The basis of Olson and Truxam’s study was focused on the questions, “What would science and mathematics preservice teachers need to understand about literacy to better appreciate its role in teaching and learning content?” (p. 422).

**Literacy and Math**

Walker, Zhang and Surber (2008) questioned whether or not reading ability impacted mathematical performance. The researchers used three different readability
indexes: Flesh-Kincaid, Powers and Dale-Chall to determine the read ability of large-scale math texts. Due to the differences in the three indexes, the results were not consistent. In addition, there was not enough language in the math problems to determine level of difficulty. Walker, Zhang and Surber state despite the limitations the analyses implied that the math examinees who differ in terms of their reading ability would not be equally likely to obtain correct answers to mathematics items that were more complex in terms of their readability even though the mathematical competence of these examinees would be considered equivalent had it been measured by mathematics items that were less complex in terms of readability.

(p. 177)

The researchers offered two suggestions:

1) Rewrite the problem in a manner that would allow students to correctly comprehend the problems presented resulting in correct solutions.

2) Provide students with standardized audio recordings of the text, which may eliminate the compounding affect of reading that is measured by some of the mathematics items.

Literacy and Social Studies

According to Billmeyer (2004), a big flaw in many social studies texts, is their lack of activities to engage prior knowledge. The information being taught is often something that occurred long ago, and most students do not see any
direct correlation to their lies. This makes creating prior knowledge essential in order for the reader to grasp the concept and information of new material, it is up to teachers to encourage them to see the purpose in reading, no matter the content or the context. (p. 185)

Billmeyer states further that

we need to teach students effective strategies for learning from poorly organized, poorly written text, as lifelong skills. Many teachers not only use a variety of reading strategies to support learning, but an increasing number also are using supplementary materials such as magazines, newspapers, trade books and young adult and children’s literature. Teachers who surround their students with nonfiction trade books and other materials to help them build background knowledge model interesting reading and help them to understand difficult concepts. (p. 76)

According to Hansen (2009), “teachers can make U.S. History come alive for students by helping them make emotional and personal connections to it through multiple literacies” (p. 597). Hansen’s belief is based on the notion that secondary school content instruction may be in need of a new orientation within an adolescent literacy perspective. He states, “the definition of content literacy is to be expanded beyond engagement with a single textbook to a variety of sign systems including the use of writing to learn” (p. 598).

The use of various texts increases the possibility that students will engage in rich conceptual information that promotes critical thinking. Hansen stated “students’
connections with their own life experiences enabled the students to understand that their issues were also central to the citizens of past centuries and decades” (p. 600).

**Literacy and Technology**

Researchers Zenkov and Harmon (2009) examined a project entitled *Through Students Eyes*, which used a photovoice method to allow middle and high school students of diverse backgrounds and living in poverty to document via photographs and accompanying reflections what they believe are the purposes of school, the supports for their school success, and the barriers to their school achievement. (p. 575)

The study of 100 youth revealed a void in the traditional high school curriculum, which they perceived as irrelevant to their lives. Based upon the study’s findings, the researchers concluded that it is “imperative that teachers allow youth to share stories of their relationships to school and its literacy practices, and also that we build our curricula and pedagogies upon such fluid, student-centered processes” (p. 583).

According to Billmeyer (2004) now more than ever students need to learn how to read for information to make critical decisions about their reading, to form opinions based on what they have read, and to respond intelligently to material read. Furthermore, students need to be able to take information from the world wide web, evaluate it, and use it effectively. (p. 123)
According to Olson and Truxaw (2009)

information is no longer easily vetted by teachers, librarians or publishers and new skills are required to capitalize on the information potential of the world wide web with the infusion of new information sources we see expanded opportunist to help preservice teachers develop more sophisticated understanding of content area literacy.

(p. 423)

Alvermann and Phelps (1994) also believe that

when students have positive reading experiences beyond their textbooks, their chances for becoming lifetime readers' increases. The researchers believe that reading from fiction/nonfiction sources enhance a student's content area knowledge as well as his or her overall reading and thinking abilities. Lastly, by reading about the same topic from multiple perspectives, students learn to exercise critical thinking skills, and are exposed to other people and cultures. Alvermann and Phelps also argue that some forms of literature such as newspapers, magazines, computer and multi-media publishing are more up to date than textbooks. (p. 111)

Also the researchers believe that more studies are needed to investigate what characterizes an exemplary school in which teachers, administrators, and supervisory personnel actively engage in applying relevant findings from the available studies and are effectively teaching struggling readers reading in the content areas (Alvermann & Phelps, 1994).
Further support for stronger, more intensive, content area literacy instruction comes from Lapp, Flood and Farnan's (2008) book, *Content Area Reading and Learning Instructional Strategies*, in which they stated that adolescents often have wide-ranging interests that involve content learning in and out of school. But that there often exists a disconnect between students out of school literacy lives and the tasks they are asked to perform in school.

Lapp, Flood and Farnam state "clearly conventional notions of texts, teens and teaching must change to meet the challenges of 21st century and 21st century content area reading" (p. 9). They suggest strategy instruction aimed at guiding students' content area learning. In particular, they consider work aimed at engaging students in the reading, critique, and synthesis of multiple texts panning in- and out-of-school reading.
Chapter Three: Methods

In this research study, I explored how middle and high school reading specialists negotiate their role while working with content area specialists. The current shift in education is to improve/increase literacy across the curriculum (IRA, 2006). However, little research has been done to examine the role that literacy coaches are expected to fulfill or how they currently are working with content area specialists to increase literacy skills of students.

Participants and Context

The study participants were four middle/high school reading specialists all of whom teach in schools in western New York. The reading specialists serve students in grades 7-12. The manner in which they serve their students varies: some provide instruction in one-on-one pull out sessions, others work with small groups of students and others push in to support math, science and social studies content area specialists. In middle school, the content area classes meet daily for 45-60 minutes; in high schools, classes are 90 minutes and meet two or three times per week.

Data Collection

I created 25 survey questions (see Appendix A) based on a 2006 survey by the International Reading Association, “Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches”. The survey contains questions related to the reading specialists’ education
background, years of teaching experience, the daily duties and expectations of the role, and how they interact with content area specialists.

I sent an initial e-mail to participants inviting them to complete an anonymous on-line survey. The e-mail addresses were kept confidential and were only known by myself and my thesis advisor. The survey results were be compiled and forwarded to me by a technology specialist at The College at Brockport. The survey results were anonymous to ensure participants’ confidentiality. Upon final approval of my thesis research all confidential information will be shredded.

Data Analysis

I examined the participants’ responses and code for patterns and themes. The survey’s open-ended questions created the categories of teaching experience, roles and responsibilities and professional development. I first used the categories to create the individual portraits and then compared and contrasted the participants’ responses across the portraits.

My Positionality

I am certified to teach English language arts, 7-12, and I am currently pursuing my master’s in childhood literacy. In addition, I am finishing the requirements to become certified as a special education teacher. I have one year teaching experience in a suburban setting as an 8th grade English teacher, and one year as a building substitute in an urban setting. Currently, I am a 7th grade consult teacher pushing into four content area classrooms—science, math, English and social studies—to support my students with disabilities. All of these positions provided me
with opportunities to work collaboratively with reading specialists in the roles defined by their respective school districts.

In this study, I was an insider as I have experience teaching in a middle school setting. I am an outsider because I have no experience teaching at the high school level nor have I worked as a reading specialist. One of the reading specialists is a former colleague with whom I collaborated while I was a classroom middle school English teacher. It was from this experience that I began to value the collaboration between the reading specialist and myself.

**Procedures**

I contacted the perspective participants individually via e-mail and invited them to complete the on-line survey. I included a link to the anonymous survey in the e-mail. I attached the informed consent to the e-mail message. I reviewed the completed surveys within one week. It took four weeks to analyze the results. I then shared my findings with my research partners to ask for their feedback, a process that enhanced the validity of my research process.

**Criteria for Validity**

I conducted negative case analysis as I conferred with research partners to ensure that I explored a diversity of interpretations. I used referential adequacy by examining the open ended data set to demonstrate my knowledge of the subject matter with language and concepts shared by others in the field of literacy.
addition, the data is trustworthy as I used only the exact responses/words of the participants.

**Limitations**

My study is limited in several ways. First, of the 83 reading specialists who I originally solicited, only four responded (4.8 percent). Due to the limited responses I was unable to provide an in depth contrast and comparison. In addition, their responses are subjective and solely their opinions. Also, I am conducting this study in western New York and the results therefore, cannot be replicated or applied to other school settings.

In addition, the process through which I obtained the data—on-line survey—is limited in scope since the survey is limited to 25 questions. Because the survey is anonymous, I will not be able to follow up with the participants to probe for further clarification of responses. Lastly, because my data will be limited to the on-line survey data, I will only be able to represent a limited picture of a reading specialist’s role in working with content area specialists.
Chapter Four: Findings

An increased focus on students' reading skills brings with it a need for greater accountability; therefore, any interventions must benefit students' performance. In order to achieve these goals, collaboration should occur among reading specialists, content area teachers, and administrators as they initiate, implement and evaluate instruction methods to ensure that teachers are meeting the students' needs and promoting their success in reading across all areas of the content.

In this study, I used data gathered through an on-line survey (see Appendix A), adapted from Blamey, Meyer & Walpole (2008/2009), to create a portrait of each of the four reading specialists. Taken together, the portraits create a picture of how these four secondary reading specialists in western New York negotiate their roles and responsibilities with administrators, colleagues and students. In each portrait, I focus on the educational and professional background of the teacher, and the individual roles and responsibilities each teacher has as a collaborator, a coach and evaluator. At the end of each portrait, I share the reading specialists' beliefs regarding professional dispositions and advice for future reading specialists.

Portrait of Reading Specialist A

Educational Background and Professional Experience

Reading Specialists A holds a bachelor's degree in English Language Arts and a master's degree with an emphasis in literacy. He or she has been working as a part-
time reading coach for one year in both middle and high school settings. He/she has four years of classroom experience in the middle/high school level as an English/Language Arts (ELA) classroom teacher.

Reading Specialist A stated that his or her role as ELA Team Leader has been defined by the principal, and in this role, he or she is responsible for ELA Exam Preparation and exam scheduling. His or her primary role or responsibility is the preparation for the annual seventh and eighth grade ELA examinations. Reading Specialists A works with approximately three teachers each school year. To support his/her role as literacy/reading coach, the teacher participates in district-level professional development. This reading specialist believes district-level professional development has helped him/her develop the most as a literacy/reading coach.

**Roles and Responsibilities**

As a collaborator, Reading Specialist A has participated in the following activities:

1. Facilitated small-and large-group discussions with teachers about student skills.
2. Helped align curriculum to state and district requirements.
3. Conducted ongoing evaluation of literacy improvement action plan (or school improvement plan).
4. Managed time and/or resources in support of literacy instruction.
5. Listened and responded to the needs of students.
6. Listened and responded to the needs of staff.
7. Listened and responded to the needs of parents.
8. Understood and respected issues of confidentiality.
9. Responded promptly to requests for assistance from teachers.
10. Facilitated discussions on issues in adolescent literacy.
11. Demonstrated positive expectations for students' learning.
12. Encouraged the reading specialists to serve as resource for the content area teachers.
13. Kept administrators informed and involved in literacy efforts.
15. Examined curriculum materials.
16. Met regularly (at least once a month) with other coaches in the school or district.

Reading Specialist A believes he or she receives the most support in terms of future professional learning by meeting regularly with other coaches in the district.

As a **coach**, Reading Specialist A has participated in the following activities during the most recent school year:

1. Worked with teachers individually, providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies.
2. Worked with teachers in collaborative teams, providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies.
3. Assisted teachers in the analysis and selection of content area texts and instructional materials that meet the diverse needs of students.
4. Assisted teachers in developing instruction designed to improve students’ abilities to read and understand content area text and spur students’ interest in more complex text.
5. Facilitated professional development related to instructional strategies for literacy that content area teachers could adopt and adapt for their classrooms.
6. Assisted teachers with improving writing instruction, student writing, and appropriateness of writing instruction and assignments.
7. Linked teachers to current evidence-based research to help make research more tangible and applicable.
8. Provided ongoing support to teachers as they try strategies out themselves.

Reading Specialists A believes that the area where he or she needs the most support in terms of future professional learning is related to assisting classroom teachers.

As an **evaluator**, Reading Specialist A has participated in the following activities during the most recent school year:

1. Led faculty in the selection and use of a range of assessment tools in order to make sound decisions about the students’ literacy needs.
2. Set schedules for administering and analyzing both formative and summative assessments.
3. Helped teachers standardize the scoring of writing and other literacy measures.
4. Conducted regular meetings with content area teacher to examine student work and monitor progress.
5. Helped teachers use the analysis of various assessment results to determine which strategies will support higher achievement.

Reading Specialist A feels competent in developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in English/language arts. In terms of future professional learning, Teacher A believes he or she needs the most support in helping teachers use the analysis of various assessment results to determine what strategies will support higher student achievement. Teacher A feels the need for greatest improvement in two areas: developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in mathematics, and developing and implement instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in science.

**Professional Dispositions and Advice**

Reading Specialist A believes that the three most important personal attributes a middle/high school literacy/reading coach should have in order to be successful are flexibility, motivation, and people skills. Teacher A advises future middle/high school literacy/reading coaches to work on developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in English/language arts.
**Educational and Professional Background**

Reading Specialist B holds a bachelor's degree in an area other than education. He or she has a New York State teaching certificate and a master's degree with an emphasis in literacy. He or she has been working as a full-time reading coach in both middle and high school settings for one year. He or she has thirteen years of experience as a reading specialist at the middle/high school level.

Reading Specialist B stated that his or her role was defined prior to the start of the school year, he or she was given his or her charge and was instructed on what areas of literacy to emphasis and the order in which to focus on each item. Reading Specialist B met with administrators to discuss the priority areas, the emphasis and the action plan. Throughout the year, Reading Specialist B continues to touch base with administrators. Reading Specialist B considers his or her primary role or responsibility to be professional development, and the examination of data to help guide teachers' professional development to improve student achievement. Reading Specialist B works with teachers in grades four through grade twelve. To support his/her role, the reading specialist attends national conferences, keeps current with professional readings and attends study groups. This reading specialist believes that literacy coaching forums (a public assembly, lecture, or program involving audience or panel discussion), his or her professional reading and national conferences have contributed most to his or her development as a reading specialist.
Roles and Responsibilities

As a collaborator, Reading Specialist B has participated in the following activities:

1. Assisted the principal in developing a literacy team.
2. Collaborated to conduct an initial school wide literacy assessment.
3. Facilitated small-and large-group discussions with teachers about student skills.
4. Communicated the findings of the initial school wide literacy assessment to staff and other stakeholders.
5. Developed and implemented a literacy improvement plan.
6. Helped align curriculum to state and district requirements.
7. Conducted ongoing evaluation of literacy improvement action plan (or school improvement plan).
8. Managed time and/or resources in support of literacy instruction.
9. Showcased effective strategies employed by content area teachers.
10. Listened and responded to the needs of students.
11. Listened and responded to the needs of staff.
12. Listened and responded to the needs of parents.
13. Understood and respected issues of confidentiality.
14. Responded promptly to requests for assistance from teachers.
15. Facilitated discussions on issues in adolescent literacy.
16. Demonstrated positive expectations for students' learning.
17. Applied concepts of adult learning and motivation to the design of professional development.
18. Encouraged the reading specialists to serve as resource for the content area teachers.
19. Kept administrators informed and involved in literacy efforts.
20. Remained current with professional literature on the latest research.
22. Examined curriculum materials.
23. Met regularly (at least once a month) with other coaches in the school or district.
24. Attended professional seminars, conventions, and other training in order to receive instruction on research-based literacy strategies.
25. Attended professional seminars, conventions, and other training in order to receive instruction on how to work effectively with adult learners.

Reading Specialist B believes he or she receives the most support in terms of future professional learning through the school wide literacy improvement plan.
As a coach, Reading Specialist B has participated in the following activities during the most recent school year:

1. Worked with teachers individually, providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies.
2. Worked with teachers in collaborative teams, providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies.
3. Worked with teachers in departments, providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies.
4. Assisted teachers in the analysis and selection of content area texts and instructional materials that meet the diverse needs of students.
5. Assisted teachers in developing instruction designed to improve students’ abilities to read and understand content area text and spur students’ interest in more complex text.
6. Explored with content area teachers cross-cultural communication patterns in speaking and writing and their relationship with literacy skills in English.
7. Developed a repertoire of reading strategies to share with and model or content area teachers.
8. Helped determine which reading strategies are best to use with the content being taught.
9. Assisted teachers with improving writing instruction, student writing, and appropriateness of writing instruction and assignments.
10. Linked teachers to current evidence-based research to help make research more tangible and applicable.
11. Observed and provided feedback to teachers on instruction-related literacy development and content area knowledge.
12. Demonstrated instructional strategies
13. Provided ongoing support to teachers as they try strategies out themselves.

Reading Specialist B believes that the area where he or she needs the most support in terms of future professional learning is working with teachers individually and in collaborative teams to support a full range of reading, writing and communication strategies.

As an evaluator, Reading Specialist B has participated in the following activities during the most recent school year:

1. Led faculty in the selection and use of a range of assessment tools in order to make sound decisions about the students’ literacy needs.
2. Developed a comprehensive assessment program that uses both informal and formal measures of achievement.
3. Conducted regular meetings with content area teacher to examine student work and monitor progress.
4. Helped teachers analyze trends in content area achievement tests.
5. Helped teachers use the analysis of various assessment results to determine which strategies will support higher achievement.

Reading Specialist B indicated that he or she feels competent in developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in English/language arts. Reading Specialist B believes he or she needs the most support in his or her future professional learning, specifically, in the development of a comprehensive assessment program that uses both informal and formal measures of achievement. Reading Specialist B indicated his or her area in greatest need of improvement is in developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in mathematics.

**Professional Dispositions and Advice**

Reading Specialist B also believes that the three most important personal attributes that a middle/high school literacy/reading coach should have in order to be successful are good listening skills, the ability to “read” people well, and the ability to make change effective.

Reading Specialist B advises future middle/high school literacy/reading coaches to make changes slowly. Reading Specialist B advises future designers of professional development to survey coaches prior to professional development in order to tailor professional development to the audience.
Portraits of Reading Specialist C

Educational Background and Professional Experience

Reading Specialist C holds a bachelor’s degree in English/language arts, a master’s degree with an emphasis in literacy, and a reading specialist certificate. He or she has been working as a part-time reading coach and a part-time reading specialist in the high school setting for four years. He or she has twenty years of classroom experience. As a reading specialist, Teacher C has eighteen years experience. He or she also has two years teaching classroom experience as a middle school English/language arts teacher.

Reading Specialist C stated that his or her role has been defined by the school district through professional development in literacy coaching. Reading Specialist C has had little input from his or her building principal and there are no other guidelines in place. As a result, the reading specialists are left to format their roles on their own. The lack of clear guidelines makes it difficult to know how he or she is perceived by the classroom teachers. Reading Specialist C considers his or her primary roles or responsibilities as a reading specialist to provide support for students who are reading below grade level in content areas. As a literacy coach, Reading Specialist C sees his or her primary role to provide support and strategies for new teachers. Reading Specialist C works with eight to ten classroom teachers on a regular push in or coaching basis but many more on a consultancy level. To prepare for his or her role as a literacy/reading coach, Reading Specialist C has participated in state-level professional development, district-level professional development and has kept current on research through professional readings. Reading Specialist C believes that
regular meetings to discuss roles with other literacy coaches have helped him or her to develop the most as a literacy/reading coach. To support his or her role as a reading specialist, the teacher attends national conferences, keeps current with professional readings, and attends study groups. This reading specialist believes the literacy coaching forum, his or her professional reading, and national conferences have helped his or her development most as a reading specialist.

**Roles and Responsibilities**

As a collaborator, Reading Specialist C has participated in the following activities:

1. Assisted the principal in developing a literacy team.
2. Collaborated to conduct an initial school wide literacy assessment.
3. Facilitated small-and large-group discussions with teachers about student skills.
4. Communicated the findings of the initial school wide literacy assessment to staff and other stake holders.
5. Managed time and/or resources in support of literacy instruction.
6. Showcased effective strategies employed by content area teachers.
7. Listened and responded to the needs of students.
8. Listened and responded to the needs of staff.
9. Listened and responded to the needs of parents.
10. Understood and respected issues of confidentiality.
11. Responded promptly to requests for assistance from teachers.
12. Facilitated discussions on issues in adolescent literacy.
14. Encouraged the reading specialists to serve as resource for the content area teachers.
15. Examined curriculum materials.
16. Met regularly (at least once a month) with other coaches in the school or district.
17. Attended professional seminars, conventions, and other training in order to receive instruction on research-based literacy strategies.
Reading Specialist C believes he or she receives the most support in terms of future professional learning through attending meetings about coaching, collaborating with staff, and facilitating discussions.

As a coach, Reading Specialist C has participated in the following activities during the most recent school year:

1. Worked with teachers individually, providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies.
2. Worked with teachers in collaborative teams, providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies.
3. Worked with teachers in departments, providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies.
4. Assisted teachers in the analysis and selection of content area texts and instructional materials that meet the diverse needs of students.
5. Explored with content area teachers cross-cultural communication patterns in speaking and writing and their relationship with literacy skills in English.
6. Developed a repertoire of reading strategies to share with and model or content area teachers.
7. Helped determine which reading strategies are best to use with the content being taught.
8. Assisted teachers with improving writing instruction, student writing, and appropriateness of writing instruction and assignments.
9. Facilitated professional development related to strategies to help students analyze and evaluate Internet sources.
10. Linked teachers to current evidence-based research to help make research more tangible and applicable.
11. Observed and provided feedback to teachers on instruction-related literacy development and content area knowledge.
12. Ensured teacher observations are nonthreatening.
13. Regularly conducted observations of content area classes to collect informal data on strategy implementation and student engagement.
15. Demonstrated instructional strategies
16. Provided ongoing support to teachers as they try strategies out themselves.

Teacher C believes that the area where he or she needs the most support in terms of future professional learning is in how to provide ongoing support to teachers,
how to conduct observations followed by dialogue, and how to provide content area teachers with strategies

As an evaluator, Reading Specialist C has participated in the following activities during the most recent school year:

1. Developed a comprehensive assessment program that uses both informal and formal measures of achievement.
2. Set schedules for administering and analyzing both formative and summative assessments.
3. Introduced content area teachers to ways to observe adolescent’s literacy skills.
4. Introduced content area teachers to ways to observe ELL’s language development progress.
5. Helped teachers use the analysis of various assessment results to determine which strategies will support higher achievement.

Reading Specialist C feels competent in two areas: continuing developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in English/language arts and developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in social studies. Reading Specialist C believes he or she needs the most support in terms of future professional learning in leading faculty in the selection and use of a range of assessment tools in order to make sound decisions about the students’ literacy needs, and in setting schedules or administering and analyzing both formative and summative assessments. Reading Specialist C believes continued development and implementation of instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in English/language arts and social studies are areas in of greatest improvement.
Professional Dispositions and Advice

Reading Specialist C believes that the three most important personal attributes that a middle/high school literacy/reading coach should have in order to be successful are the ability to develop individual instruction for low, unmotivated readers, the ability to adjust instruction to meet the needs of individual teachers, and the ability to use of various methods in approaching content with students who have not had success in the classroom.

Reading Specialist C advises future designers of professional development to hold regular meetings with literacy coaches so they can share techniques and current readings amongst themselves. Reading Specialist C advises future middle/high school literacy/reading coaches to be prepared to adjust instruction using several methods, materials and strategies for the many different learning styles and levels of the high school students who are experiencing difficulties in reading, studying, and test-taking.

Portrait of Reading Specialist D

Educational Background and Professional Experience

Reading Specialist D has a reading specialist certificate. He or she has been working as a full-time reading coach in the middle school setting for four years. Reading Specialist D has five years experience as a reading specialist. In addition, he or she has twelve years teaching classroom experience as a middle school English/language arts teacher.
Reading Specialist D stated that his or her role as a reading specialist has been defined by his or her district. In addition, Reading Specialist D stated his or her building principal defined his or her role as a literacy coach as someone who will support special education teachers and provide additional instructional support to teachers in their efforts to increase student achievement. Reading Specialist D considers his or her primary role or responsibility as a reading specialist to coach English/language arts and special education teachers in best practices in literacy instruction. Reading Specialist D works with twenty-five teachers on a regular basis. To prepare for his or her role as a literacy/reading coach Reading Specialist D has attended national conferences. Reading Specialist D believes that regular meetings to discuss roles with other literacy coaches have helped him or her to develop the most as a literacy/reading coach. To support his/her role as a reading specialist, the reading specialist attends national conferences, keeps current with professional readings, and attends study groups. This reading specialist believes literacy coaching forums, his or her professional reading, and national conferences have helped him or her to develop most as a reading specialist.

**Roles and Responsibilities**

As a collaborator, Reading Specialist D has participated in the following activities:

1. Assisted the principal in developing a literacy team.
2. Collaborated to conduct an initial school wide literacy assessment.
3. Facilitated small-and large-group discussions with teachers about student skills.
4. Communicated the findings of the initial school wide literacy assessment to staff and other stake holders.
5. Developed and implemented a literacy improvement plan.
6. Helped align curriculum to state and district requirements.
7. Conducted ongoing evaluations of literacy improvement action plan.
8. Managed time and/or resources in support of literacy instruction.
9. Showcased effective strategies employed by content area teachers.
10. Listened and responded to the needs of students.
11. Listened and responded to the needs of staff.
12. Listened and responded to the needs of parents.
13. Understood and respected issues of confidentiality.
14. Responded promptly to requests for assistance from teachers.
15. Facilitated discussions on issues in adolescent literacy.
16. Demonstrated positive expectations for students' learning.
17. Applied concepts of adult learning and motivation to the design of professional development.
18. Encouraged the reading specialists to serve as resource for the content area teachers.
19. Kept administrators informed and involved in literacy efforts.
22. Attended professional seminars, conventions, and other training in order to receive instruction on research-based literacy strategies.

Reading Specialist D believes he or she receives the most support in terms of future professional learning through the examination of best practices, communication with shareholders and through respect for confidentiality.

As a coach, Reading Specialist D has participated in the following activities during the most recent school year:

1. Worked with teachers individually, providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies.
2. Worked with teachers in collaborative teams, providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies.
3. Worked with teachers in departments, providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies.
4. Assisted teachers in the analysis and selection of content area texts and instructional materials that meet the diverse needs of students.
5. Assisted teachers in developing instruction designed to improve students' abilities to read and understand content area text and spur students' interest in more complex text.
6. Facilitated professional development related to instructional strategies for literacy that content area teachers could adopt and adapt for their classrooms.
7. Helped determine which reading strategies are best to use with the content being taught.
8. Assisted teachers with improving writing instruction, student writing, and appropriateness of writing instruction and assignments.
9. Linked teachers to current evidence-based research to help make research more tangible and applicable.
10. Observed and provided feedback to teachers on instruction-related literacy development and content area knowledge.
11. Ensured teacher observations are nonthreatening.
12. Regularly conducted observations of content area classes to collect informal data on strategy implementation and student engagement.
13. Before and after observations, engaged in reflective dialogue with teachers.
14. Demonstrated instructional strategies
15. Provided ongoing support to teachers as they try strategies out themselves.

Reading Specialist D believes the area where he or she needs the most support in terms of future professional learning is assisting content area teachers with reading and writing, and support teachers’ use of best practices.

As an evaluator, Reading Specialist D has participated in the following activities during the most recent school year:

1. Led faculty in the selection and use of a range of assessment tools in order to make sound decisions about the students’ literacy needs.
2. Set schedules for administering and analyzing both formative and summative assessments.
3. Aided in the design and/or implementation of formative assessments to determine the effectiveness of a strategy.
4. Helped teachers standardize the scoring of writing and other literacy measures.
5. Reviewed current research and trends in assessment methodologies.

Reading Specialist D feels competent in developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in English/language arts, developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in mathematics, developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in science and developing and implementing instructional strategies
to improve academic literacy in social studies. Reading Specialist D believes he or she needs the most support in terms of his or her future professional learning in developing a comprehensive assessment program that uses both informal and formal measures of achievement, conduct regular meetings with content area teachers to examine student work and monitor progress, and introduce content area teachers to ways to observe ELL’s language development progress. Reading Specialist D feels his or her area in need of greatest improvement is continued development and implementation of instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in social studies.

Professional Dispositions and Advice

Reading Specialist D believes the three most important personal attributes that a middle/high school literacy/reading coach should have in order to be successful are confidentiality, enthusiasm, and flexibility.

Reading Specialist D advises future designers of professional development to provide a time and place for coaches to gather and collaborate. Reading Specialist D advises future middle/high school literacy/reading coaches to get some classroom experience first before becoming a coach because they will need to draw upon it to be able to connect with the teachers and relate better to students.

Looking Across the Portraits

I found several commonalities when looking across the portraits of the four reading specialists. What is most similar, and perhaps not surprising, is that all four
reading specialists perform the four main roles designated by the International Reading Association (www.reading.org): collaborators, coaches, evaluators and instructional strategists. (Instructional strategists were included under the coach section in the survey.)

The reading specialists are leaders who simultaneously perform the roles of coach, collaborator and evaluator based upon the situation. It is not to say they perform all the responsibilities under each role but rather they draw upon a repertoire of experiences and strategies and implement what is need at that moment.

All four reading specialists have prior experience as a classroom teacher; their years of teaching experience range from four to twenty years. The number of teachers who they worked with varied. For example, Reading Specialist A worked with three teachers while, Reading Specialist B works with many teachers but did not provide an exact count, Reading Specialist C works with eight to ten teachers on a regular basis, and Reading Specialist D works with twenty-five teachers throughout the school year.

Professional Development

The four specialists, regardless of years of experience and school district support, are motivated and invested in improving their skills and strategies through professional development. They demonstrate this through their attendance of conferences, seminars, workshops that are designed to improve their teaching skills and strategies and would ultimately affect student achievement.
The on-line survey included an open-ended question related to an area in most need of improvement, and participants had the option of completing the question or leaving it blank. All four specialists were open and honest in indentifying areas in their practice that are in need of improvement, and expressed a willingness to work on those specific areas, which I believe demonstrates their willingness to their professional growth.

Three of the four participants, Reading Specialist A, B and D, indicated that they had strong support from both their individual school districts and their building principals. Reading specialists C, B and D attended professional seminars, conventions, and other training in order to receive instruction on research-based literacy strategies. Reading Specialist B attended professional seminars, conventions, and other training in order to receive instruction on how to work effectively with adult learners.

**Collaborator**

The four reading specialists had multiple activities in common in their role as collaborator. For example, each of the four stated that they facilitated small-and large-group discussions with teachers about students’ skills. All four examined best practices and curriculum materials. They listened and responded to the needs of students, staff and parents, and they understood and respected issues of confidentiality.

Reading Specialists A, B and D helped to align curriculum to state and district requirements, and kept administrators informed and involved in literacy efforts.
Specialists B, C and D assisted the principal in developing a literacy team at their school site, and collaborated to conduct an initial school wide literacy assessment. They also communicated the findings of the initial school wide literacy assessment to staff and other stakeholders. These three specialists also showcased effective strategies employed by content area teachers. Reading Specialists A, B and C met regularly with other coaches in the school or district, and they facilitated discussions on issues related to adolescent literacy at their school sites.

Reading Specialists B and D applied concepts of adult learning and motivation to the design of professional development, and conducted ongoing evaluations of literacy improvement action plans for their school.

Reading Specialist A believes that meeting regularly with other coaches in his or her district would strengthen his or her collaborative abilities. Reading Specialist B remains current with the latest professional research literature, and feels as a collaborator he or she would benefit from a school wide literacy improvement plan. Reading Specialist C believes meeting with coaches, collaborating with staff and holding facilitated discussions would assist him or her as a collaborator. Reading Specialist D needs further support when examining best practices, communicating with shareholders while maintaining confidentiality to enhance his or her work as a collaborator.

Coach

In their role as a coach, all four participants worked with teachers individually and in collaborative teams providing support on a full range of reading,
writing, and communication strategies. All four participants assisted teachers in the analysis and selection of content area texts and instructional materials that meet the diverse needs of students. All four participants assisted teachers with improving writing instruction, student writing, and appropriateness of writing instruction and assignments. All four participants linked teachers to current evidence-based research to help make research more tangible and applicable. All four participants provided ongoing support to teachers as they try strategies out themselves.

Reading Specialists B, C and D demonstrate instructional strategies, and work with teachers in departments providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies. The three specialist help determine what reading strategies are best to use with the content being taught, and they observe and provide feedback to teachers on instruction-related literacy development and content area knowledge. Reading Specialists A, B and D assist teachers in developing instruction designed to improve students’ abilities to read and understand content area text and spur students’ interests in more complex text.

Reading Specialists A and D facilitate professional development related to instructional strategies for literacy that content area teachers could adapt for their own classrooms. Reading Specialists B and C explore cross-cultural communication patterns in speaking and writing and their relationship with literacy skills in English with content area teachers. The specialists have developed a repertoire of reading strategies to share with and model for content area teachers. Reading Specialists C and D regularly conduct observations of content area classes to collect informal data on strategy implementation and student engagement. They also hold before and after
observations, and engage in reflective dialogue with teachers. Reading Specialist C facilitates professional development related to strategies to help students analyze and evaluate Internet sources. None of the four reading specialists provides content area teachers with professional development related to metacognitive reading strategies.

As a coach, Reading Specialist A stated he or she needs additional support when assisting classroom teachers. As a coach, Reading Specialist B stated he or she needs additional assistance working with teachers individually and as a collaborative team in order to support a full range of reading, writing and communication strategies. As a coach Reading Specialist C stated he or she needs assistance with the providing of ongoing classroom teacher support, observations followed by dialogue and needs additional strategies to provide to content area teachers. As a coach, Reading Specialist D needs support when assisting teachers with reading and writing, and linking teachers to best practices.

_Evaluator_

There were no common activities shared by all four reading specialists in their work as an evaluator. Reading Specialists A, B and D lead faculty in the selection and use of a range of assessment tools in order to make sound decisions about students’ literacy needs. Reading Specialists A, C and D set schedules for administering and analyzing both formative and summative assessments. Reading Specialists A, B and C help teachers use the analysis of various assessment results to determine what strategies will support higher achievement.
Reading Specialists B and C develop comprehensive assessment programs that use both informal and formal measures of achievement. Reading Specialists A and D help teachers standardize the scoring of writing and other literacy measures. Reading Specialists A and B conduct regular meetings with content area teachers to examine student work and monitor progress.

Reading Specialist B help teachers analyze trends in content area achievement tests. Reading Specialist C introduces content area teachers to ways to observe adolescent’s literacy skills, and he or she introduces content area teachers to ways to observe English Language Learners’ language development progress. Reading Specialist D assists teachers in the design and/or implementation of formative assessments to determine the effectiveness of a strategy, and he or she reviews current research and trends in assessment methodologies.

In terms of what Reading Specialists thought they needed the most support in terms of your future professional learning; Reading Specialist A said using analysis of various assessments to determine strategies to support higher achievement. Reading Specialists B and D stated the development of a comprehensive assessment program. Reading Specialist C requires additional support in the use of assessment tools and set up scheduling of ongoing assessments.

**Professional Dispositions**

Reading Specialist A believes flexibility, motivation and people skills are the attributes reading specialists need to be successful. Reading Specialist D stated similar attributes: flexibility, enthusiasm and confidentiality. Reading Specialist B
stated that reading specialists need good listening skills, the ability to read people well and the ability to make change effective. Reading Specialist C stated that reading specialists need the ability to develop individual instruction for low unmotivated readers, be able to adjust instruction to meet the needs of individual teachers and the ability to use various methods in approaching content with students who have not had success in the classroom.

When I look across the participants’ suggested attributes, I believe the difference in responses may be due to the number of years of classroom experience. For example, Reading Specialist A has four years classroom experience, Reading Specialist B has 13 years, Reading Specialist C has 20 years and Reading Specialist D has 12 years of classroom experience.

I also think the number of years as a coach has an impact on their responses. Reading Specialist A has one year of experience as a coach, the same for Reading Specialist B. Reading Specialists C and D both have four years of experience as a coach.

I believe another important factor that has influenced the participants’ thinking is the grade level in which they serve as a coach. Reading Specialist A and B serve in the middle school and the high school. Reading Specialist C serves only the high school. Reading Specialist D serves only the middle school. It may be that the reading specialists’ years of experience and the settings wherein these experiences take place have an impact on the dispositions the participants feel are necessary for a reading specialist to be successful.
Advice for Future Reading Specialists

The four participants each offered advice to future reading specialists. Reading Specialist A advised future reading specialists to work on developing and implementing instruction strategies to improve academic literacy in English Language Arts. Reading Specialist B suggested that future reading specialists survey coaches prior to professional development in order to tailor professional development to the audience. Reading Specialist C encouraged future reading specialists to be prepared to adjust instruction using several methods, materials and strategies for the many different learning styles and levels of the high school students with reading and study and test-taking difficulties. Reading Specialist D suggested reading specialist get some classroom experience first because they will need to draw upon it to be able to connect with the teachers and relate better to students.

As I reviewed the reading specialists’ advice, I wondered how the number of teachers with whom they work and the variety of contexts in which they work, coupled with their years of experience, shaped their advice. Reading Specialist A works with three teachers. Reading Specialist B did not indicate the number of teachers (my assumption here is that this reading specialist works with many teachers). Reading Specialist C works with eight to ten teachers on a regular basis but many more on a consultancy level. Reading Specialist D works with twenty five teachers each school year.
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

Through this research, I have explored the roles of middle and high school reading specialists. Specifically, I examined how they negotiate their roles with content area specialists, administrators and students.

In this chapter, I present how the reading specialists negotiate multiple roles and responsibilities, engage in a variety of ongoing professional development activities, engage in multiple forms of collaboration, and demonstrate and recommend specific personal and professional dispositions. I then present my recommendations for future research and how I expect to apply the knowledge that I have acquired in my future work.

Conclusions

Negotiate Multiple Roles and Responsibilities

Based on my research findings, the reading specialists fulfill their roles and responsibilities through a variety of ways and in a variety of contexts. Three reading specialists had their roles pre-designed by their individual school district or more specifically their building principal. It is within the prescribed framework that they interact with content area teachers as collaborators, coaches and evaluators of classroom instruction. When their roles are not pre-designed by administrators or district personnel, the reading specialists negotiate their roles with their colleagues based on mutual respect and through discussion regarding what they and their colleagues believe are best for the needs of the students.
Findings from the National Reading Panel Report (2002) resulted in a position statement entitle “Teaching All children to Read: The Roles of the Reading Specialist (IRA, 2000), which called for reading specialists to apply their expertise in assessment, instruction and leadership.

This was evident in my study as two reading specialists they had observed classroom instruction and provided feedback to the content area teacher, while other reading specialists focused more on instructional strategies that they shared with the content teacher. In one case the reading specialist was approached by content area teachers with specific problems and sought his or her assistance.

In addition, three out of the four reading specialists in my study collaborated to conduct an initial school wide literacy assessment. They also communicated the findings of the initial school wide literacy assessment to staff and other stakeholders.

In two cases reading specialists were asked to develop and implement a literacy improvement plan. These two also assisted the principal in developing a literacy team, or collaborated to conduct an initial school wide literacy assessment. All the reading specialists listened and responded to the needs of students, staff and parents and understood and respected issues of confidentiality.

Engage in a Variety of Ongoing Professional Development Activities

From my research findings, I understand that the reading specialists are active in a range of professional development opportunities. They, attend conferences, seminars and professional development session to further develop their personal skills and strategies, which they then share with the content area teachers.
In addition to attending professional development sessions, the reading specialists also conduct professional development for and with content area teachers, either informally in small groups or individually when content area teachers have a question or a concern. In these individually situations, the reading specialists and the content area teacher look for the best approach to an issue or need, or perhaps a specific strategy they want to develop or understand more thoroughly.

Engage in Multiple Forms of Collaboration

From my research findings, it is clear that all four reading specialists appreciate the dedicated time they have to meet with other reading specialists to share best practices. This form of collaboration enables the reading specialists to bring their collective experiences to one forum and the sharing of these experiences enable each reading specialist to gain skills and strategies they hadn’t utilized before. The degree to which the reading specialists collaborate with content area teacher depends on the reading specialists own classroom experience and/or their experience as a reading specialist. The amount of collaboration is also defined by the grade levels they instruct, middle or high school, as the needs of these two groups differ. Therefore, interactions with content area teacher are clearly defined by the needs of the students. The reading specialists draw upon their classroom experiences when collaborating with content area teachers; having the first hand knowledge of the dynamics of a classroom aids the reading specialists in their work with the content area teachers.
Demonstrate and Recommend Personal and Professional Dispositions

All four reading specialists value and embody specific personal and professional dispositions. To follow are the four dispositions; flexibility, able to listen to others (student, parents, administrators), effective at making change and recognize that change occurs slowly and the ability to adjust instruction to meet the needs of individual learners.

I adapted my survey from Blamey and Walpole’s (2008/2009) Middle and High School Literacy Coaches: A National Survey. As I compared the results of their survey with the results of mine I found some commonalities. For instance, in both studies the participants had previously taught in a content area prior to becoming a reading specialist. Also in both studies professional development was reported as being the most helpful to the reading specialists’ development.

The Blamey and Walpole (2008/2009) study concluded that the top three roles and responsibilities of their respondents were collaborator, coach and evaluator. It is from this study that I choose to focus on those three roles in my research. As collaborators, the participants in both studies respected confidentiality, examined best practices, and examined curriculum materials. As coaches, participants in both studies worked with teachers individually and in team/small groups, and they also assisted teachers with instruction in the content areas. As evaluators, participants reviewed assessment research in the Blamey and Walpole study wherein in my study they specifically led faculty in the selection and use of a range of assessment tools in order to make sound decisions about the students literacy needs. In both studies, the standardization of scoring was conducted by the respondents. The respondents in the
Blamey and Walpole study helped teachers determine which strategies to support their students; in my study the respondents placed that activity under the role of coach.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

I can offer several recommendations for future research based on the findings of my study. First, very few qualitative studies regarding reading specialists at the middle/high school level exist, so additional studies are warranted. I would recommend personal interviews when possible with follow up sessions to clarify or expand any responses, perhaps even, a personal log asking each reading specialist to jot down their specific incidences of their involvement with content area teachers. A focus on reading specialists and their daily, weekly, and monthly interactions with content area specialists would provide data that is very specific and not limited to the responses to survey questions.

A study that focuses on the daily, weekly or monthly interactions between reading specialists and content area specialists would have to have a coding system to indicate the issue or situation at hand, the level of intensity, the time dedicated to this incident and the results of the intervention. A study of this nature could provide more data to guide school districts and administrators especially when they are deciding the roles and responsibilities of the reading specialists with whom they are collaborating.

Additionally, studies need to be conducted throughout the United States to be able to compare the roles and responsibilities of readings specialists from across the
nation. This type of study could provide a common understanding of what and how readings specialists are fulfilling their roles and responsibilities throughout the nation.

I also recommend a study to examine if reading specialists are being utilized effectively. For example, a researcher could examine how readings specialists are making an impact in teachers’ classrooms. For this study, the data would be reported by content area teachers and they would need to log their personal interactions with reading specialists and a rating system on what is to be considered an effective interaction or outcome.

Because my study was limited to four participants, I believe a lot could be learned if researchers examined a larger portion of reading specialists (for example thirty to sixty reading specialists from twenty-five school districts in the western New York area). This study should be a longitudinal study conducted by school based administration that examines student achievement based upon a specified areas perhaps reading, writing, speaking and listening for information and understanding. Since this is a specific English Language Arts Standard in New York State this data could be obtained through the yearly ELA exam. This could include areas in which reading specialist have made an impact and areas in need of improvement. This would apply to teachers and students as well. If studies such as the ones I mentioned above occurred then, perhaps, administrators could get the data out to the general public and the local government officials to further support reading specialists in their respective school districts to elicit funding from federal and state agencies.
My Personal Future Applications

As a classroom teacher and possible future reading specialist, I have developed a strong foundation of understanding regarding the many aspects that are necessary to provide effective literacy instruction from personal dispositions to consideration of others, to a willingness to be open-minded, to new strategies and ways of thinking. This research has furthered my belief in lifelong learning. I realize more than ever that I must continue to attend future professional development courses as I believe that teachers also remain students. I look forward to the opportunity to apply the knowledge I have gained from my research and the opportunity to share it with my peers.
Appendix A
Online Survey

Educational background
1. Check all that apply:
   - I have a bachelor’s degree in something other than education.
   - I have a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education.
   - I have a bachelor’s degree in elementary education.
   - I have a bachelor’s degree in math education.
   - I have a bachelor’s degree in science education.
   - I have a bachelor’s degree in social studies education.
   - I have a bachelor’s degree in English/language arts education.
   - I have a bachelor’s degree in special education.
   - I have a bachelor’s degree in music, art, or physical education.
   - I have a teaching certificate for the state in which I teach.
   - I have a master’s degree with an emphasis in literacy.
   - I have a master’s degree with an emphasis in something other than literacy.
   - I have a reading specialist certificate.
   - I have a master’s degree in education emphasizing something other than literacy.
   - I have a PhD or EdD.

Teaching Experience
2. For how many years have you been a coach?
3. Do you coach full-time (e.g., it is your only job) or part-time (e.g., you also teach students every day)?
4. How many years of classroom teaching experience do you have?
5. If you are a reading specialist, how many years have you worked as a reading specialist (e.g., teaching struggling readers daily)?
6. How many years of teaching experience do you have at the middle or high school levels as a classroom teacher?
7. If you have middle or high school classroom experience, which content areas have you taught? (Check all that apply.)
   - English/language arts
   - Foreign language
   - Math
   - Science
   - Social studies
   - Other, please specify
8. In which building level(s) do you serve as a literacy/reading coach?
   - Middle school
   - High school
   - Both
9. How has your role been defined by your district?
10. How has your role been defined by your principal(s)?
11. What do you consider your primary role or responsibility?
12. Approximately how many teachers do you work with each school year?

Coaching Preparation

13. In which activities have you participated to prepare for your role as a literacy/reading coach? (Check all that apply.)
   Graduate-level course(s)
   National conferences
   State-level professional development
   District-level professional development
   Professional reading
   Study groups
   Work with literacy coach mentor
   Other, please specify
   None of the above

14. Out of the above activities, which 3 activities do you feel have helped you develop the most as a literacy/reading coach?

15. What advice would you give future designers of professional development for literacy/reading coaches?

Roles and Responsibilities

16. As a collaborator, check all the activities that you have participated in during the most recent school year.
   Assisted the principal in developing a literacy team.
   Collaborated to conduct an initial schoolwide literacy assessment.
   Facilitated small- and large-group discussions with teachers about students’ skills.
   Communicated the findings of the initial schoolwide literacy assessment to staff and other stakeholders.
   Developed and implemented a literacy improvement plan.
   Helped align curriculum to state and district requirements.
   Conducted ongoing evaluations of literacy improvement action plan (or school improvement plan).
   Managed time and/or resources in support of literacy instruction.
   Showcased effective strategies employed by content area teachers.
   Listened and responded to the needs of students.
   Listened and responded to the needs of staff.
   Listened and responded to the needs of parents.
   Understood and respected issues of confidentiality.
   Responded promptly to requests for assistance from teachers.
   Facilitated discussions on issues in adolescent literacy.
   Demonstrated positive expectations for students’ learning.
   Applied concepts of adult learning and motivation to the design of professional development.
   Encouraged the reading specialist to serve as resource for the content area teachers.
Kept administrators informed and involved in literacy efforts.
Remained current with professional literature on the latest research.
Examined best practices.
Examined curriculum materials.
Met regularly (at least once a month) with other coaches in the school or district.
Attended professional seminars, conventions, and other training in order to receive instruction on research-based literacy strategies.
Attended professional seminars, conventions, and other training in order to receive instruction on how to work effectively with adult learners.

17. Out of the above activities, rank the top 3 activities with which you believe you need the most support in terms of your future professional learning.

18. As a coach, check all the activities you have participated in during the most recent school year.
   Worked with teachers individually, providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies.
   Worked with teachers in collaborative teams, providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies.
   Worked with teachers in departments, providing support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies.
   Assisted teachers in the analysis and selection of content area texts and instructional materials that meet the diverse needs of students.
   Assisted teachers in developing instruction designed to improve students’ abilities to read and understand content area text and spur students’ interest in more complex text.
   Provided content area teachers with professional development related to metacognitive reading strategies.
   Facilitated professional development related to instructional strategies for literacy that content area teachers could adopt and adapt for their classrooms.
   Explored with content area teachers cross-cultural communication patterns in speaking and writing and their relationship with literacy skills in English.
   Developed a repertoire of reading strategies to share with and model for content area teachers.
   Helped determine which reading strategies are best to use with the content being taught.
   Assisted teachers with improving writing instruction, student writing, and appropriateness of writing instruction and assignments.
   Facilitated professional development related to strategies to help students analyze and evaluate Internet sources.
   Linked teachers to current evidence-based research to help make research more tangible and applicable.
   Observed and provided feedback to teachers on instruction-related literacy development and content area knowledge.
Ensured teacher observations are nonthreatening (used as a tool to spark discussion). Regularly conducted observations of content area classes to collect informal data on strategy implementation and student engagement. Before and after observations, engaged in reflective dialogue with teachers. Demonstrated instructional strategies. Provided ongoing support to teachers as they try strategies out themselves.

19. Out of the above activities, rank the top 3 activities with which you believe you need the most support in terms of your future professional learning.

20. As an evaluator, check all the activities that you have participated in during the most recent school year. Led faculty in the selection and use of a range of assessment tools in order to make sound decisions about the students’ literacy needs. Developed a comprehensive assessment program that uses both informal and formal measures of achievement. Set schedules for administering and analyzing both formative and summative assessments. Aided in the design and/or implementation of formative assessments to determine the effectiveness of a strategy. Helped teachers standardize the scoring of writing and other literacy measures. Reviewed current research and trends in assessment methodologies. Conducted regular meetings with content area teachers to examine student work and monitor progress. Introduced content area teachers to ways to observe adolescent’s literacy skills. Introduced content area teachers to ways to observe ELL’s language development progress. Helped teachers analyze trends in content area achievement tests. Helped teachers use the analysis of various assessment results to determine which strategies will support higher achievement.

21. Out of the above activities, rank the top 3 activities with which you believe you need the most support in terms of your future professional learning.

22. Check all that you feel competent in: Developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in English/language arts. Developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in mathematics. Developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in science. Developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in social studies.

23. In which area do you feel the need for greatest improvement?
Developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in English/language arts.
Developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in mathematics.
Developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in science.
Developing and implementing instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in social studies.

Professional Dispositions
24. What are the 3 most important personal attributes you believe a middle/high school literacy/reading coach should have in order to be successful?

25. What advice would you give future middle/high school literacy/reading coaches?
References


