

The 21st Century Reading Specialist

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to define and describe a new instructional practice model for 21st century reading specialists. The role of the reading specialist has shifted over the past 30 years moving from an orientation of fixing reading difficulties in students to one of leading collaborative school-wide efforts on improving the literacy growth of all students. Much of this change has developed from increased accountability requirements, along with the requirements of Response to Intervention (RTI). This paper explores how 21st century reading specialists can effectively practice as literacy leaders who successfully meet the literacy needs of students and the professional learning needs of teachers. Recommendations for implementing the model are also provided.

The reading specialist has traditionally been seen as a *fix-it* role, providing remedial help for those students falling behind in classroom literacy expectations. This role was seen as one of promise — a lone reading specialist in the school ensuring all students read at the required levels. However, this traditional role has not produced the expected results (Allington, 2009, p. v). Unless school districts radically rethink how they allocate time and expectations for reading specialists, the old traditional role of *pull-out and fix it* will continue to produce students falling behind.

Quality classroom instruction, supported by the reading specialist, is emerging as a viable alternative producing the expected achievement results. With increased literacy expectations driven by state achievement tests and budget cuts in the area of professional development for teachers, the potential of the reading specialist as an onsite professional learning provider for faculty is prime for promoting rich literacy teaching in every classroom.

This is not a recent phenomenon. In 1969, the U.S. Commissioner urged educators to organize all possible resources toward eliminating reading deficiencies which existed among more than a quarter of the population (Vogt & Shearer, 2003). By the 1960's, professional

coaching had become a subtle expectation for the role of the reading specialist; a reading specialist was expected to be able to develop relationships with classroom teachers, parents, administrators and students, and be able to communicate effectively with all these people (Guth & Pratt-Fartro, 2011; Stauffer, 1967). Some states began to differentiate between the reading specialist role and the role of literacy coach or instructional coach, whereas other states redefined the role of the reading specialist. In a national survey by Roller in 2006, 67% of responding coaches reported working closely with classroom teachers, 25% reported they worked with both teachers and students, and less than 2 percent reported they worked only with struggling students (Sailors, 2009, p. 6).

Allington (2009) describes this changing expectation for the reading specialist as “old wine with a new label” going on to state that literacy educators know what to do because we have been successful. In the past five to ten years, we have studies with multiple school districts that have demonstrated that with quality reading instruction and timely intervention, 98% of all children can be reading on level by the end of first or second grade (Guth & Pratt-Fartro, 2011; Allington, 2009). To accomplish this goal, reading specialists and literacy coaches hold the specialized knowledge that works in a reciprocal relationship. They support student achievement while also supporting teachers’ instructional effectiveness (L’Allier, Elish-Piper & Bean, 2010). The International Reading Association also recognized the importance of the changing roles of reading specialists and coaches with its revised standards (IRA, 2010b). These literacy professionals play crucial roles associated with student achievement including, a) assessing the strengths and needs of students, b) supporting classroom teachers in appropriate instruction, c) acting as school-wide resources, and d) leading literacy endeavors through effective communication and collaboration with all stakeholders (IRA, 2010b). The challenge continues to be encouraging all administrators and teachers to expect and provide rigorous and responsive literacy instruction in all classrooms.

Traditional Model vs. New Model

Response to Intervention (RTI), a three-tiered intervention process, is a consistent, yet flexible framework for early and appropriate identification of students experiencing literacy difficulties. In the absence of RTI, students are identified with learning disabilities primarily based on discrepancies between ability (IQ testing) and achievement (test scores and academic performance) (Wixson & Valencia, 2011). Unfortunately, this process does not always involve classroom teachers and reading specialists working together to investigate why students are having difficulties prior to moving ahead with the special education identification testing. With an RTI framework, classroom teachers, ESL teachers, school psychologists and reading specialists collaboratively work to provide a series of increasingly more strategic interventions to determine literacy strengths and challenges exhibited by students in hopes of better meeting those needs with instruction that occurs outside a special education setting (IRA, 2010a). RTI helps promote a shared vision of responsibility for literacy growth of all students among all

school staff and faculty. In other words, student learning becomes a collective task. RTI is a “framework to help schools identify and support students before the difficulties they encounter with language and literacy become more serious” (IRA, 2010a, p. 1).

RTI may be school districts’ ticket to re-conceptualizing the role of the reading specialist, viewing the reading specialist more as a collaborative literacy leader than a remedial “fix and return” specialist. The traditional model had teachers working solo in their classrooms and sending the less capable literacy students to the reading specialist. Often there are too many students needing services; therefore, a paraprofessional may instruct them out of the classroom under the guidance of the specialist. Students then return to the classroom most likely having missed some sort of instruction from the teacher. This movement back and forth between learning environments and being publically separated from peers can often negatively affect a student’s sense of confidence in learning and motivation for reading.

Conversely, the new model has teachers and reading specialists working collaboratively together to plan and deliver the highest quality reading instruction in the classroom environment. Students are no longer being pulled from the classroom and signaled out from their peers. Instead, it’s all hands on deck to provide targeted intensive intervention and striving to accelerate learning of students in Tier Two, with only a small percentage of the population being seen independently by the reading specialist in Tier Three or Tier Four, depending on the configuration of the school district’s RTI plan.

This new 21st century conceptualization of the reading specialist can also be viewed as a literacy leader who focuses on the preventive aspect of high quality reading instruction in every classroom, every day. Moving to a literacy leader model requires a paradigm shift in the minds of all literacy stakeholders. Initially, we need to move from a *fix the student* orientation, to a *prevent reading difficulties* orientation. This new mental model takes a more proactive stance by acknowledging the responsibilities of all administrators, teachers, reading specialists, paraprofessionals, parents and the students themselves in providing high-quality, consistent and developmentally appropriate assessment, instruction and resources to students in every content area at every grade level. With the support of the reading specialist as literacy leader across contents, “the expectation is that responsive instruction in Tier 1 will diminish the need for Tier 2 and 3 support for most students” (Brozo, 2011, p. 147; Brozo, 2010).

Next, the new model challenges us to move from a *remediation* orientation to one of *motivation* for all students. Consistent with preventing reading difficulties is the often neglected notion of motivation, especially at the early grades (Marinak, Malloy & Gambrell, 2010). Educators and parents assume that young children naturally love books and reading. However, this is not necessarily the case especially in situations where children are lacking access to positive reading role models, time, choice, or appropriately leveled texts (Guth & Pratt-Fartro, 2010). Literacy leaders must ensure that students, teachers and parents understand the interplay between achievement and motivation in reading. When students read more, they become better readers which, in turn, motivate them to read more (Stanovich, 1986).

Finally, in the literacy leader model, the reading specialist needs to be viewed as moving from a *case load manager* to a *leader of all loads*. The reading specialist should no longer see only students identified as the most challenged readers in the school as there is room for literacy growth in *all* students. The 21st century reading specialist should be leading school-wide efforts within individual classrooms to ensure that all students are receiving effective literacy instruction.

Dramatic Shifts in Roles and Responsibilities

To exemplify this paradigm shift, data was collected from 30 reading specialists and literacy coaches over a 13-year span in one suburban school district in a Mid-Atlantic state (Guth & Pratt-Fartro, 2011). Each participant was asked to document time spent on tasks as related to the following responsibilities: pull-out programs, testing and meetings. Results indicate a dramatic shift in responsibilities as exemplified in Figure 1.

Figure 1 . Results of Reading Specialist and Reading Coaches Time Spent on Tasks

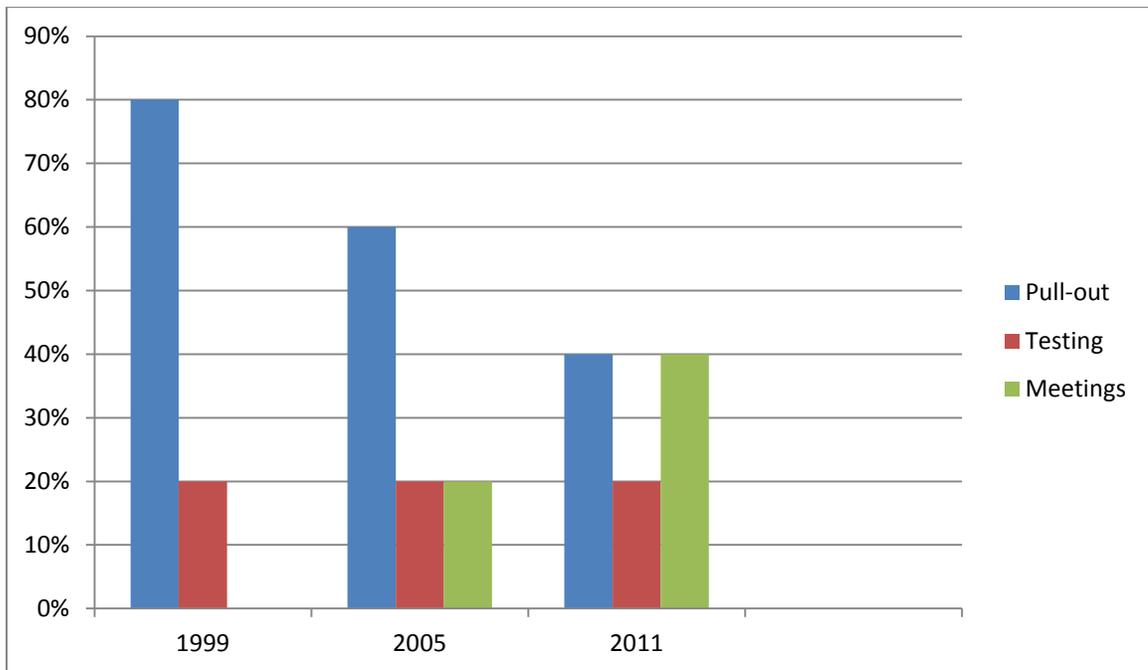


Figure 1: A dramatic shift over a 13-year span has occurred in reading specialist’s responsibilities. Results represent the roles of 30 reading specialists and literacy coaches.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the percentage of time spent on tasks related to pull-out programs has decreased by approximately 50% over the course of 13 years. Results related to

testing tasks indicate that while the percentage of time spent on testing has remained consistent, specific responsibilities have shifted from completing diagnostic testing of individual students to being responsible for school-wide literacy test administration, compilation and dissemination of results. Additionally, in 1999, no reading specialists indicated time spent in meetings as a majority of their workload, although over the course of data collection, participants have indicated increased responsibilities of attending general meetings related to reading, to most recently attending and facilitating school-wide leadership meetings. These results suggest that demands placed on 21st century reading specialists are shifting to those more aligned with school-wide literacy efforts. Therefore, in moving towards a literacy leader model, new responsibilities and differing roles for the reading specialist are needed.

First, the reading specialist must assist the staff in setting school-wide literacy goals and then educate them in healthy reading practices by providing job-embedded professional learning opportunities specifically related to those goals, as well as to diagnostic, assessment and standardized achievement data. Second, specialists must schedule and monitor regular reading screenings for all students with more in-depth and frequent screening for struggling readers. Third, best practices should be modeled in all classrooms to strengthen the educational immune system of all students, not just those who struggle in reading. Finally, the reading specialist must take the lead on providing the staff with healthy research-based ideas and resources to support literacy growth in every tier of instruction. This outreach extends beyond the school to homes where families can be encouraged to get involved in school-based literacy activities to help learn methods to keep students on a healthy at-home reading course.

Recommendations for 21st Century Reading Specialists

The following recommendations will assist our 21st century reading specialists to fulfill these new literacy leader roles and responsibilities as they work to meet the literacy needs of every student every day. First and foremost, scheduling the use of reading specialists' time needs to be collaboratively determined by administrator and the specialists with the common understanding that it remains flexible enough to meet the needs of teachers and students. Specialist need to have time for regularly scheduled meetings with each grade level within a school. The foci of these meetings may include such target areas as modeling literacy strategies, resource exploration and training, or discussion of diagnostic testing procedures. Reading specialists' schedules also need to reflect time for in-class modeling of best literacy practices, coaching teachers and working directly with students based on RTI needs. Students may be seen by reading specialists in a small-group setting within a classroom or outside of the classroom for more targeted and specialized individualized instruction. However, if reading specialists are pulling students out of classrooms, we suggest limiting those groups to no more than three per day so that specialists have ample time to fulfill their other responsibilities to the broader school community. For example, reading specialists must have time to develop and implement professional learning opportunities for paraprofessionals and teachers as related to

their data-driven specific needs centered on resources, assessment, instruction, and community relations.

Next, 21st century reading specialists must be well-versed in the specific RTI implementation procedures unique to the school so that targeted instruction with students and professional learning with teachers can take place. Reading specialists can coach teachers with strategies focused on the learning needs of students within each tier. For example, a tier one strategy might be in-class modeling with discussion and application to a specific content lesson or support of guided reading and literacy centers. A tier two focus may include coaching on lesson development and study aimed at improving the comprehension of a small group of striving readers. Tier three coaching may include a professional book study with application on how to best meet the needs of students who are two to three years behind in reading grade level expectations.

Finally, in order to achieve school-wide buy-in and collaboration with reading specialists, their responsibilities must be accurately and routinely relayed to school-based employees and external stakeholders. This includes any administrative expectations placed on reading specialists, such as conducting school-wide needs assessments and walk-throughs, testing administration, lesson observations, and possible evaluative tasks.

The recent adoption of the Common Core Standards and its content expectations will undoubtedly result in even greater variability in student performance calling for differentiated teaching approaches, as characterized by RTI (Wixson & Lipson, 2012) and a literacy leader model. The success of these differentiated approaches depend on a specialized literacy professional leading each charge, to specifically design instruction and learning based on student data, teachers' expertise and school-wide needs. The time has come for a literacy leader in each school, uniting reading professionals, RTI, and the Common Core expectations. When all school-based staff understand the reading specialist's roles as one of literacy leader, positive pedagogical changes and increased student learning will occur. Student growth can now be correlated to the amount of time that a reading specialist teaches, co-teaches or coaches in classroom which suggests that instructional practices rather than literacy programs are responsible for increased student achievement (Bean, 2009).

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