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THE READING SPECIALIST'S ROLE AS PERCEIVED BY READING SPECIALISTS, ADMINISTRATORS, SPECIAL EDUCATION INSTRUCTORS, AND CLASSROOM TEACHERS

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Do different school staff members agree on the importance of various roles a reading specialist may perform? This article reports the opinions of reading specialists, as well as beliefs of the administrators, special education instructors, and classroom teachers regarding roles of the reading specialist.

Duties of reading specialists certainly may be quite diverse, as outlined by Smith, Otto, and Hansen (1978), Stauffer (1978), and Wilson (1977). Examples of their duties include such responsibilities as being a diagnostician, a resource for other teachers, a parent educator, a remedial instructor, and a program evaluator. None of these functions, however, is stressed as more or less important in terms of their productive impact on students' reading abilities. We wondered which roles were valued as most effective by reading specialists. We also wondered how their beliefs compared with those of other staff members with whom they worked.

The Study

A questionnaire identifying 10 roles which a reading specialist might perform was first developed. These roles, which incorporated various roles discussed by the previously cited authorities, combined with the duties defined by a medium-sized Maryland County school system. Questionnaires were then delivered to elementary reading specialists, administrators, special education instructors, and classroom teachers in this same school system. They were asked to rank order the 10 roles in terms of each role's "ultimate productive impact on children's reading abilities." A total of 22 reading specialists, 12 administrators, 24 special education instructors, and 171 classroom teachers returned the form. The mean rankings of each of these four groups were then determined and are shown in the table on the next page.

The Reading Specialists' Rankings

The reading staff put a priority on diagnosing and special reading classes (remediation), a traditional role of many specialists. But, their second choice was to help teachers assess and plan instruction for their students. In this capacity, reading specialists can indirectly service many more children than when

Ranking of the Reading Specialist's Productive Roles
(a lower number indicates a greater priority)

Roles	By reading specialists	By administrators	By special education instructors	By classroom teachers
Diagnose and remediate students in special reading classes	1	3	1	2
Help teachers assess students and plan instruction	2	1	3	1
Inform teachers about effective materials and methods	3	2	2	3
Tutor students	4	6	5	4
Organize school's reading program	5	9	6	5
Provide parents with suggestions	6	7	8	7
Teach gifted students	7	10	9	9
Develop materials with teachers	8	4	7	6
Evaluate reading curriculum	9	5	4	8
Teach reading in regular classrooms	10	8	10	10

they only work with students on individual or small group bases.

If a reading specialist spends some time working with six teachers who each teach 25 children, for example, the specialist could have an impact on 150 children in addition to those she normally works with in her reading center. The specialists' third choice of informing teachers about effective materials and methods nicely complements their second choice, as both roles provide a service for teachers.

Their fourth choice of tutoring students, returns to a focus on direct contact with children again. Ranked in fifth position was organizing a school reading program, a finding which certainly was influenced by the fact that this school district generally determines major curriculum decisions at the county level, rather than at the individual school level. Many of the reading specialists probably felt that they had less impact on these decisions which were predetermined for them by the central office.

Working with parents, their sixth priority, indicated some faith that parents could affect students' progress. Their seventh choice of teaching gifted students is a role they are typically

not assigned in this county, but it was rated above three other duties they occasionally do perform: developing materials with teachers (eighth rank); curriculum evaluation (ninth rank); and, teaching reading in a regular classroom (tenth rank). The specialists may have believed that classroom teachers should conduct most of the developmental teaching in their rooms, relying on specialists for assistance in planning instruction on occasion or when necessary.

Administrators', Special Education Instructors', and Classroom Teachers' Rankings—Compared and Contrasted

Computing a Spearman rank correlation coefficient, a value of $r_s = .56$ was obtained for administrators and reading specialists. The degree of agreement between special educators and reading specialists was stronger ($r_s = .74$), while the strongest agreement about productive roles existed between classroom teachers and reading specialists ($r_s = .93$). Furthermore, the roles ranked in the top three positions by reading specialists were also rated in positions one, two or three by the administrators, special education instructors, and classroom teachers. Obviously a high level of agreement existed between the specialists' rankings of these 10 roles and each of the other three groups. This concurrence of opinion should positively affect students' progress.

Findings of this study were shared with educators in our graduate course. Although many of these individuals were not involved in this study, they expressed general agreement with the ratings made by the four specific groups.

A Recommendation

Discussions with the educators who participated in the study further emphasized the concern for the specialists' role of helping teachers assess and plan instruction for their students. This role was rated by classroom teachers and administrators as their number one choice, and by reading specialists as their second choice. Special educators also rated it as relatively important, in third place.

Several reading specialists and classroom teachers lamented that they currently did not have much time for interaction, although they felt such time would be productive. One specialist summarized her situation as follows: "Unfortunately there just isn't enough time in the day to sit down with other teachers and jointly plan for many of the kids who need help. I feel it would be quite beneficial, but my schedule is already full just working with children all morning and afternoon. Yes, I do mention new materials to teachers, but I can quickly do that when we eat lunch or during recess. There's no way I can help plan instruction for all the other students who need help. Both the classroom teachers and I need some common meeting time for this, and with current budget cuts, I don't see myself getting a day off each week just to work with the teachers."

After listening to this specialist's comments, as well as similar statements by others, we understood that they believed this role was highly important, and that they would like to see it as more of a reality in their immediate teaching situation. We therefore suggest that this duty needs additional attention in order to further improve the services reading specialists can provide their schools.

In buildings where there is not time scheduled for contact between specialists and teachers, beyond the informal meeting at the coffee urn, is there any way to allow interaction time, and still reserve most of the specialist's time for direct work with children? We can suggest one possibility. If the specialist were freed from direct contact with children for just a half-hour period each day, s/he could see each classroom teacher at least once a month. Scheduling this half-hour release on a rotating basis (i.e., Monday 9:00-9:30, Tuesday 10:00-10:30, Wednesday 11:00-11:30, Thursday 1:00-1:30, and Friday 2:00-2:30) would allow the specialist to contact classroom teachers during their most convenient time preferences. Some time could similarly be scheduled with the administrator to keep him/her informed of joint work of the specialist and teachers.

This is only one possibility to encourage more interaction between classroom teachers and reading specialists. Certainly if a school is committed to the reading specialist's role of helping teachers, as they seemingly are, they will explore other options specific to their school.

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