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AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION . . .

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Reading Specialist: "I feel like a lifeguard on a river with drowning students floating by. Just as I rescue one, another calls for help and I plunge in again. Soon I become exhausted, so I go upstream to see why so many are in trouble. Imagine my surprise when I see some jumping in and a few even being pushed. I realize that I need to work as hard, if not harder, upstream at prevention as I work downstream at remediation."

Role Conflict

More than a decade ago, Wylie (1969) reported that reading specialists, classroom teachers, and school administrators hold conflicting perceptions of the reading specialists' major functions. On the one hand, many reading specialists, dissatisfied with the results of remedial teaching, prefer to leave what Stauffer (1967) called the bottomless pit of remediation, to do staff development and consulting to prevent reading failure.

Meanwhile, many administrators and teachers continue to prefer that reading specialists work only as remedial teachers (Pikulski and Ross 1979). There appears to be little doubt that many reading specialists manifest a classic role conflict where different and sometimes conflicting role expectancies exist for the same position. For example, Mangieri and Heimburger (1980) reported that school administrators perceived instruction and diagnosis to be the reading consultants' most important role while consultants preferred an inservice and resource-person role.

Funding Patterns and Preferred Roles

While the intensity of this conflict varies from person to person and school to school, one basic cause appears to be funding pattern. As Campbell (1979) pointed out, less than desirable reading achievement is a national concern but funds are limited. Money that is available is usually earmarked for direct remedial services to students and little, if any, is available to hire specialists to provide inservice training or to consult with teachers to prevent reading failure. This is unfortunate because remedial reading is, in the words of Otto (1977) "a costly experiment that has failed." Another reading authority, Spache (1981), reviewed thirty follow-up studies of remedial reading and concluded there is little evidence of any long term effects. He contends that remedial reading should be considered

"...as a temporary, supportive effort to help the student deal with his current academic problems, not as a cure or even a preventative for future problems" (p. 403).

In spite of the national concern over low reading achievement, and in spite of the evidence that remedial reading tends to relieve reading difficulties on a temporary basis, there is little evidence that funding patterns will be changed dramatically. There is every reason to believe that in most schools administrators and teachers will continue to find specialists to provide remedial reading services.

Current funding patterns may explain why administrators and teachers expect remedial services, but what explains why some reading specialists prefer a staff development role? For an answer to this question consider what Johnson and Kress (1968) had to say about remedial services, "All too often the basic instructional program of the school has gone unchanged while special reading teacher after special reading teacher has been added to the staff to correct reading disabilities. The result has been that a never-ending and sometimes steadily increasing supply of retarded readers has been guaranteed." On the other hand, Sergiovanni (1969) reported that a chief source of job satisfaction for teachers is knowing that their efforts caused students to achieve. And so the belief that one is making school life more tolerable for poor readers is no doubt satisfying for many reading specialists. However, other reading specialists are convinced that many remedial reading problems are caused by ill-conceived school programs and faulty classroom instruction (Spache, 1976). Otto, Smith, and Hansen (1978) said it this way:

"Many reading problems are caused by teaching practices and instructional materials that for any number of reasons do not provide students with the quantity and/or quality of reading instruction they need to avoid reading problems."

In light of these assertions it seems obvious why many experienced reading specialists are convinced that working with principals and teachers to correct faulty practices in classroom and school must receive as much, if not more emphasis as remediation.

Better Reading Instruction for All Students

Although there is not a widespread movement to use reading specialists to prevent failure (Briggs & Coulter, 1977), there are indications that funding patterns are shifting from remedial services to staff development and consultant services. Educators in Wisconsin are now implementing legislation passed in 1976 that directs each school district to employ reading specialists who will work with teachers and administration to develop, implement, coordinate, and evaluate the K-12 reading curriculum (Vance and Quealy, 1978). The Wisconsin bill is an example of an attempt through legislation to prevent reading failure, contrasting with other states that have set minimum competency standards. Rather than simply testing (after the fact) to determine who

needs remedial help, Wisconsin is providing money for staff development to improve reading instruction for all students. Just as legislation can help promote the staff development function of reading specialists, so can administrators and teachers change their expectations when reading specialists demonstrate their effectiveness as consultants. For example, Bean (1979) reported that in a special project in Pittsburgh—

"the resource role of the specialists was most valued by the teachers in the project school even though the specialist devoted only a small proportion of their time to it. The teachers apparently valued the reading specialists as colleagues who could provide direct assistance to them" (p. 412).

Remediation or Prevention?

For many reading specialists who teach remedial reading there is no role conflict. They are satisfied with their own role expectancies as well as the role expectancies that teachers and administrators tend to hold for them. But other reading specialists do not believe remedial reading is the solution to a national concern. They prefer a staff development and consulting role that seeks to improve classroom reading instruction for all students. In this role they help teachers seek answers to the following questions:

1. How well do we integrate skill development, motivation, and application of reading skills in our daily classroom reading programs?
2. To what extent do we provide independent, pleasurable reading activities and language experiences that promote the use of speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities in our classrooms?
3. What classroom organization and management techniques do we use to maximize our instructional time and the students' learning time?
4. To what extent do our classroom instructional techniques and materials match the students' interests and academic needs?
5. What methods do we use in our classrooms to monitor our instruction in order that our techniques will match student progress?

In much the same manner school-level program decisions are crucial to improving reading instruction for all students; so reading specialists help administrators answer questions about school-wide reading services:

1. Do we have a school-wide stated (written) philosophy on reading/language instruction that promotes articulation among staff?
2. To what extent do our school-wide policies, including academic requirements/standards, strengthen and integrate students' reading?
3. How well do our time allotments match our program goals and allow time for mastery learning?

4. How well does our use of materials, time, space, and staff match the developmental gains of low, average, and high achieving students?
5. To what extent do our curriculum materials match the program philosophy, promote continuity of learning, and fit our students' backgrounds?
6. Do we make optimal use of support personnel and material resources to meet the special needs of students and to support classroom teachers?
7. How well do we communicate about the reading program to parents, community, and new teachers?

What role should reading specialists play? Many will continue to provide traditional remedial services, but there are indications that the consultant and staff development role is beginning to get more attention than it has in the past. This is good news for those reading specialists who have sought to work with teachers and administrators for more than a decade. It may even be better news for children and teachers because reading specialists are demonstrating that not only can they teach students with reading problems, they can also consult with teachers and administrators to improve reading instruction for all students.

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