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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore the narratives of 22 elementary reading specialists about their work. It asked: What were reading specialists' narratives about their work and their influences? The study looked at reading specialists' day-to-day functioning within an institution and at reading specialists' interactions with students and colleagues. It considered how these mostly White women teachers were influenced by personal, professional, political, and social contexts they encountered within the institutions where they worked and the communities in which they lived.

This study was grounded in sociocultural traditions associated with inquiry into narrative. These perspectives provided a lens for understanding how participants' narratives were shaped by their histories, work in schools, and affiliation with government and community institutions, and by larger sociocultural forces such as gender, race, and class. Data sources included transcripts from in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant, which were analyzed using the constant comparison method to identify participants' narratives and historical, institutional, and sociocultural themes within and across these narratives.

Reading specialists' work has been described as fulfilling four roles: instruction, assessment, resource to teachers, and leadership. The narratives contained herein reflect participants' enactment of those roles. Participants used three main narratives, reflecting leadership, finding a niche, and teaching and collaborating, each of which revealed larger historical, institutional, and sociocultural entities that shaped the reading specialist position.

This study is significant because, while much has been written about the multifaceted roles of reading specialists, how their complex lives work is little understood. These findings have implications for school professionals, teacher education programs, and researchers who are

interested in developing clarity in reading specialists' work life expectations, as well as in training individuals whose interpersonal acumen, versatility, and literacy pedagogy prepare them for these complex positions. The findings also have implications for scholars who are interested in how various individuals participate in the complex, often under-resourced organizational cultures of schools.

ELEMENTARY READING SPECIALISTS' PERSPECTIVES TOWARDS THEIR WORK

By

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DISSERTATION

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## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This qualitative study explored 22 elementary reading specialists' narratives of their work, along with the institutional, historical, and social forces shaping these narratives. The study focused on how these reading specialists reported functioning as members of a specific institution and as members of communities and society. It considered what these mostly White female individuals said about their day-to-day enactments of their work and how these are shaped by the personal, professional, political, and social contexts within and outside the institutions where they work.

Participants in this study served as elementary reading specialists in schools throughout one state in the U.S. The study was limited to one state so that the same statewide policies were interpreted by participants at the same grade levels at different schools. Elementary reading specialists were the focus of this study because they have been identified in the literature as having both instructional and leadership roles in schools, yet much remains unknown about the history and day-to-day enactments of these complex positions. This study employed analysis of participant narratives and then represented their lived experiences as related through their narratives. Interviews with elementary reading specialists provided the means by which the complexities of their positions might be brought to light through the gathering of their work narratives. These narratives described the varied functions and responsibilities of their work lives. At the same time, their narratives also illustrated the persistence of hegemonic and cultural norms within these schools and the failure to interrupt or question those same norms.

This chapter provides a brief description of educational policies that directed reading programs and instruction and brought about the need for reading specialists to work in schools. It

also describes what is known and not known about the four major roles in which elementary reading specialists function to provide a rationale for this study. In addition, this chapter defines important terminology used in this study.

### **Rationale**

The history of reading specialists is an integral part of this study, as it is represented in the literature on reading specialists. It has shaped how reading specialists are deployed in today's schools. Additionally, this history hints that institutional and sociocultural forces have been at work in this deployment. In order to ground reading specialists' work historically, this section begins with a description of national guidelines for reading instruction, established in 1894, that led, in part, to the creation of the reading specialist position in schools.

Education and instruction in the United States have been guided by expectations set down by the Committee of Ten in 1894 (National Education Association of the United States, 1894). Several guidelines established by this group of college and high school educators continue to direct instruction to this day, specifically, graduation pathways, duration and frequency of the school day/year, and requirements for academic success. Additionally, the committee established the importance of reading, and understanding text for knowledge and critical thinking, as a primary focus of K-12 education. The committee put forth the expectation that "every teacher [is] a teacher of reading" (National Education Association of the United States, 1894, p. 424). Thus, the expectation was that all teachers at the elementary, intermediate, and high school levels would each provide reading instruction as it pertained to their pedagogy.

Resistance to this notion of "every teacher a teacher of reading" ran high, especially among secondary content area teachers. Administrators turned to probationary teachers to provide remedial reading instruction when other content area teachers, who preferred to focus on

their specific content, refused to teach what they perceived as low-status classes (Barry, 1994). The resistance from these content area teachers led administrators to assign responsibility for specialized reading instruction to English teachers, under the assumption that their content area most closely aligned with reading instruction. Responsibility for reading instruction was no longer every teacher's responsibility, but instead, it resided solely with English teachers at the secondary level (National Education Association of the United States, 1894).

The *Elementary School Reading Emphasis Act of 1973* (U.S. Congress, 1973) established criteria for reading specialists assigned to provide reading instruction for students with reading difficulties. Reading specialists, also called reading teachers, were expected to possess a master's degree in reading education and a minimum of three years' teaching experience (International Reading Association, 1986). These individuals fulfilled four major roles in elementary schools: providing instruction, assessment, resource to teachers, and leadership (Bean et al., 2002; Bean, 2004; Dole, 2004).

Since this time, the role of reading specialists in schools has varied with legislative initiatives. Reading First programs, initiated as part of the No Child Left Behind Act, and mandates for annual testing, designation of schools not meeting annual growth targets, teacher evaluation tied to literacy test scores, and disaggregated literacy performance data reinforced the need for such support personnel in schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2001-2002). Race to the Top forced changes in literacy standards and rules tying teacher evaluation to student test scores further reified this need (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Teachers' annual performance was evaluated in part by comparing student's academic growth in mathematics and reading from year to year (New York State Education Department, 2014).

According to current research, reading specialists may be responsible for instruction, for orchestrating school-wide literacy programs and assessment, for providing resources for teachers, and for general school leadership (Bean et al., 2015). The ways those responsibilities are enacted differ by individual and setting, based on the perceived needs of students and teachers, or the expectations of administrators. Previous research identified the types of work reading specialists performed, yet these studies did not explore individual's perspectives toward this work or how these perspectives varied across school settings—needed information if these positions are to be supported in ways that yield maximum effectiveness.

The nuances of this work are reflected in the stories reading specialists tell about what they do each day, narratives that capture the commonalities and the breadth of experience of those engaged in this work, as well as the contextual forces that shape it (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This study explored these narratives. It asked: What were reading specialists' narratives about their work and their influences? It is important because it lends insights into individuals' perspectives that have been absent from the most current scholarship about these complex positions.

### **Significance**

Reading achievement stands as a significant marker of academic success in K-12 education. Assessments at the state and federal levels evaluate student progress in reading and mathematics to measure academic standings nationally and internationally. District, state, and federal report cards identify reading achievement as a key marker of academic proficiency. Reading instruction is provided in all elementary classrooms and continues into secondary classrooms to ensure students' ability to comprehend what is read and accomplish tasks based on that reading. For some, acquisition of reading skills, such as decoding, fluency, and

comprehension, presents a significant barrier to academic success. Districts employ reading specialists to work with students experiencing difficulty with one or more aspects of reading. Much is known about the types of instructional practices employed to teach reading in elementary schools, from basal readers (reading text from a packaged reading and language arts program) to literature-based instruction (reading instruction using authentic literature and trade books), in whole group and small groups for guided practice and intervention. Reading specialists' roles in instruction and leadership have been studied, as have the historical aspects of their work. However, little is known about how reading specialists view their own work or about the ways historical, institutional, and sociocultural forces shape that work.

### **Discussion of Key Terms**

*Reading specialists.* A reading specialist is defined as “an individual who has a master’s degree with a major or specialty in reading from an accredited institution of higher education and has successfully completed 3 years of teaching experience which includes reading instruction” (U.S. Congress, 1973). According to the 1973 document, a “reading teacher” had a bachelor’s degree with a minimum of 12 credit hours of reading instruction and two years of teaching experience.

*Title I/Chapter 1.* The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (U.S. Congress, 1965) provided funding for schools serving economically disadvantaged students. ESEA funds were available to provide Title 1 programs to alleviate school failure, especially in reading (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989). Standardized assessment data were used to identify students whose scores did not reach an established level of reading proficiency. These students were then entitled to receive reading instruction and support through Title 1 (commonly called Chapter 1) programs staffed by remedial reading teachers and later by reading specialists.

*Pull-out/push-in (instruction)*. Pull-out reading instruction was designed to provide specialized instruction in a small-group setting, away from the general education classroom. Pull-out became common during Title 1/Chapter 1 (Allington, 1993; Bean, Trovato, & Hamilton, 1995). Push-in instruction was provided in the general education classrooms. Students learned with their peers, while the reading specialist/intervention teacher “pushed in” to the classroom to provide reading support and assist or co-teach with the classroom teacher (Allington, 1994).

*No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act of 2001 (U.S. Congress, 2001-2002). NCLB amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to reauthorize or revise existing programs. ESEA Title 1 was revised as Title I: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged. NCLB established yearly testing and assessment of student performance. Districts were required to report “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) to their state education department. These data were then forwarded to the federal government as evidence of accountability at the state level.

*Reading First* (U.S. Department of Education, 2009; 2014). The Reading First program grew out of the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Congress, 2001-2002). Its goal was to ensure that all children learn to read well by the end of third grade. Reading First grant funds were awarded to high poverty schools whose proposals showed the greatest promise of achieving the goal of students reading through the use of scientifically-based reading programs. Elementary schools awarded these monies often used a portion of the funding to support reading specialist or reading coach positions (Bean et al., 2015). Reading specialists provided instruction to students and supported classroom teachers while reading coaches focused primarily on serving classroom teachers in a coaching capacity.



*Academic Intervention Services (AIS)*. AIS services were designed to help students meet the learning standards in English language arts and mathematics in grades K-12. AIS services provided supplemental instruction in addition to regular classroom instruction to overcome barriers to improved academic performance. Need for AIS services was determined by state assessments and district-level procedures (New York State Education Department, 2000). Reading specialists were among those who provided supplemental instruction for students thus identified.

*Response to Intervention (RTI)*. Response to Intervention (RTI) was the result of federal law, 34 CFR part 300, in response to a growing concern about an over-identification of students with learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). RTI used a tiered system for identifying students needing academic support. The tiers recommended the level of support needed and the personnel qualified to provide each level of support. The first tier of instruction often occurred in the general education classroom while subsequent tiers provided increasingly intensive instruction taught by reading specialists or other intervention teachers.

*Race to the Top* (2009). Race to the Top provided funding "...to states that committed to reshaping their education systems and ensuring every student would graduate college- and career-ready, regardless of disability, race, zip code or family income" (U.S. Department of Education, 2009; 2015). States receiving these grant funds agreed to implement student achievement standards, often linked to testing, and systems for evaluating teachers and schools.

### **Overview of Chapters**

This dissertation is organized into five remaining chapters. In Chapter Two, I review the scholarly literature that informs the research question I investigated in this study. I begin the chapter by reviewing literature pertaining to reading specialists' work, including a brief look at

political aspects of reading specialists' work in schools. Next, I discuss influences on this work, including such social issues as gender, race, and class. Finally, I discuss the literature regarding teachers' and reading specialists' work narratives, its theoretical underpinnings, and its potential importance to our understandings of reading specialists' positions in schools.

In Chapter Three, I describe the research method I used in conducting this study, beginning with information about my research question and why I chose to investigate it qualitatively. I also describe inquiry into narrative as a methodological perspective. In addition, I describe my use of this method in this study, including participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and my perspective as a researcher.

Chapter Four, "Trope 1: Leadership," describes how participants narrated their work as teachers and leaders in elementary schools. This chapter presents the first of three tropes describing the narratives of those participants who viewed leadership responsibilities as a vital part of their work. These narratives describe participants' teaching and leadership responsibilities and their complex relationships with classroom teacher colleagues.

Chapter Five, "Trope 2: Finding a Niche" describes participants' attempts to establish themselves as reading specialists and to settle into the position. Some narratives describe participants' past efforts to find a niche while other narratives reflect an ongoing struggle for flexibility between their work lives and their personal lives. These narratives focus on teaching and serving as a resource to teachers. They also convey some participants' stories regarding job security and the responsibilities that complicated their day-to-day work lives.

Chapter Six, "Trope 3: Teaching and Collaborating," describes the narratives of participants who valued teaching and working with students above other aspects of their work. Stories about their work as teachers grounds their narratives, and a common thread of their work

in collaboration with classroom teacher colleagues runs through this chapter. Some narratives acknowledge the ways collaboration enhanced their teaching while other narratives show the complex nature of collaboration and adult interactions. These narratives also describe participants' roles as informal, sometimes hesitant leaders in their schools.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six describe the requirements/expectations for the reading specialist position and participants' introduction to their responsibilities in the reading specialist role. These three chapters also describe "good" reading specialists, including the qualities and characteristics participants believed reading specialists should exhibit.

Chapter Seven, Discussion and Implications, begins with a summary of the findings reported in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. It then includes a discussion of these chapters' main points, including my interpretation of the findings as well as the ways these findings inform the current literature in this area. Finally, I discuss the implications that these findings have for research, school professionals, and teacher education programs.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

As a sociocultural exploration of elementary reading specialists' narratives, this study was informed by the three areas of scholarship reviewed in this chapter. In the first section, I consider research that has examined the historical and current roles reading specialists play in schools. Next, because nearly 100% of reading specialists are White, middle class females (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009; 2013), a circumstance that presumably informs their narratives, I consider literature on the sociocultural aspects of their work, including scholarship on gender, teaching, and how gender intersects with race and class in teachers' worlds. Lastly, I review literature about inquiry into narrative, looking particularly at how it has been used to explore teachers' narratives in order to demonstrate the approach's appropriateness for exploring the sociocultural nature of reading specialists' perspectives.

### **Elementary School Reading Specialists and Programs**

As noted in Chapter 1, teachers have been hired to provide focused reading instruction in schools for nearly a century (Barry, 1994). This section briefly describes initiatives that created a need for reading specialists in schools. Then the section delineates how the early school staff who took on such roles provided instruction to individuals who struggled with learning to read. It explains how these roles evolved, with their institutional and sociopolitical context, to today's typical reality, whereby reading specialists also aid classroom teachers and school leaders in orchestrating schoolwide literacy programs, with multiple, competing influences on their work.

### **Development of Reading Specialist' Roles**

As described previously, The Committee of Ten established the importance of reading proficiency. Its primacy in academic success was driven in part by standardized assessments that

seemed to define reading proficiency and by the belief that reading provided a significant benefit to society. Technological advances provided more leisure time for reading, which promoted “...the development of enriched and stable personalities” (Gates, 1937, p. 12). Initially, reading proficiency at the secondary level was targeted with the intent to foreground the value and importance of reading for all members of society (Gates, 1937). The need for “corrective” or “remedial” (Gates, 1937, p. 21) classes at the secondary level led to the suggestion that developmental reading be part of elementary school reading programs, to ameliorate the need for reading services at the secondary level.

The evidence available justifies the conclusion that the need for remedial teaching at the higher levels can be greatly reduced in the future through carefully-planned programs of developmental training in reading in which there is made adequate provision for individual needs at the elementary-school level. (Gates, 1937, p. 21)

Reading was promoted as an academic achievement necessary for one’s career and for its ability to develop well-rounded citizens.

The focus on reading instruction created a need for specially prepared reading teachers. These individuals were expected to perform specific functions requiring specialized knowledge of and experience with reading assessments, data analysis, diagnosis and instruction as well as an ability to teach, provide demonstrations, and guide students’ reading acquisition (Gates, 1937). The specialist should also possess a “[k]een critical ability to appraise the techniques of the teacher, either from observing her at work or from records or reports of her work (Gates, 1937, p. 412).

Reading specialists received focused training enabling them to address specific needs in elementary classrooms and to direct reading programs within schools. However, a potential

existed for reading specialists and classroom teachers, schooled for general classroom teaching, to experience tension in their interpersonal interactions because of perceived differences in knowledge and levels of expertise in the diagnosis and treatment of reading difficulties.

The success of a specialist in diagnostic and remedial work depends in no small measure upon his ability to work with, through, and for the teacher, and not independently of her. The danger is that the classroom teacher may feel that diagnosis and remedial instruction of extreme cases are matters too intricate for her to understand. In effect, therefore, she may wash her hands of the problem if a specialist is available; or if one is not she may say that the case is hopeless unless an expert is provided.

On the other hand, the specialist is sometimes tempted to consider that extreme cases present highly specialized problems too complicated for the teacher to understand. In some cases his technical skill exceeds his ability to learn from the teacher. The result of such a situation is unfortunate in every way. Obviously both diagnosis and remediation are most effective when the specialist and the teacher cooperate. The teacher can give the specialist illuminating accounts of the pupil's difficulties and the methods that have been employed with him. ... Remedial instruction should not disregard earlier classroom instruction, neither should it disregard subsequent classroom instruction (Gates, 1937, pp. 413-414).

Gates's awareness of the potential tensions between classroom teachers and reading specialists was prescient (Johnston & Allington, 1991). While the possibility of conflicting perspectives carried a warning, Gates also foresaw the potential for effective teaching and subsequent schoolwide reading program improvement if classroom teachers and reading specialists collaborated.

Almost 40 years later, reading continued as a major focus in education departments at the state and federal levels. The passage of *The Education for All Handicapped Children Act* in 1975 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) ensured that children with disabilities received an appropriate education with services provided to aid their academic progress. To help achieve that end, it provided for the assessment and evaluation of educational programs serving children with disabilities. Students whose reading proficiency did not meet expectations were evaluated and sorted into either remedial education or considered for inclusion in special education (Johnston & Allington, 1991). Students in the remedial group were thought to have either environmental or experiential deficits, oftentimes addressed with remedial reading instruction.

Out of this sorting process arose the notion of students with deficits. The deficit label was applied to students living in poverty, students living with disabilities, or students who ranked in the bottom 10% of a cohort academically (Comber & Kamler, 2004). Titles such as remedial reading reified the deficit model and separated students from mainstream education. These labels, first used as program titles, became labels applied to students, thus creating a group of “others.” Ultimately, students bore this marginalizing label, and later other deficit labels, such as Chapter I, AIS, and RTI perpetuated their other-ness (Bettie, 2003; Beverine-Curry, 2016). Reading specialists and other teachers who provided instruction in these programs were identified with similar labels, as Title 1/Chapter 1 teachers, remedial teachers, AIS or RTI teachers. Over time, many students and teachers began to self-identify using these labels.

Reading programs in schools led to an ongoing need for reading specialists. Reading specialists were prepared to provide specialized instruction for students under programs like Title 1/Chapter 1 (Allington, 1994), AIS, and RTI (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). Many reading specialists were charged with responsibility to support classroom teachers and to provide

leadership for the reading/language arts program in their schools (Bean & Wilson, 1981). Reading specialists continued to fulfill these responsibilities to support students' reading achievement and the school's overall reading program.

### **History of Reading Specialists in Schools**

Most histories of the profession suggest that the first reading teachers, more than a century ago, were classroom teachers identified as having strong skills in the teaching of English, at the high school level (Barry, 1994), or in diagnosis and instruction in reading at the elementary level (International Reading Association, 1968; 1986). With the advent of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (U.S. Congress, 1965), formalized programs, referred to as Title I/Chapter 1, were put in place to remediate reading difficulties. Current teachers were reassigned to teach these classes, or schools hired reading teachers to fill Title I positions in schools (Allington, 1994; Bean, Trovato, & Hamilton, 1995).

Early reading specialists worked with high school students in need of extra help because they had difficulty completing the reading required for their academic classes (Wheelock, 1970). The practice whereby teachers added special reading classes to their teaching load, often at the recommendation of administrators, can be traced back to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the need for more reading classes grew, some English teachers taught fewer content classes to focus on providing reading instruction (Wheelock, 1970). These teachers were often selected for their teaching ability rather than any specific expertise in the psychology of reading or pedagogy, and little added preparation or professional development in reading instruction was provided to these individuals.

In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, elementary schools initiated specialized reading instruction in response to standardized testing. The development and administration of



standardized testing at the elementary level in the 1920s and 1930s (NEA, n.d.) set in motion the process of identifying elementary students based upon their reading proficiency (Johnston & Allington, 1991). These assessment data, in addition to other formal and informal data such as psychological assessments, classroom performance, and teacher observation, were used to place students in remedial reading classes. These classes, taught by a remedial reading teacher or reading specialist, provided an additional instructional period to the regular classroom reading instruction students received.

From 1900 to 1949, elementary reading programs grew in scope. In many schools, a remedial reading director oversaw the remedial program, and worked with individual students who showed significant difficulty with reading. This designation was determined by standardized test results, teacher observation, overall academic performance, informal test results, intelligence quotients, teacher opinion, and, occasionally, parent-teacher conferences (Anderson, 1968). “A discrepancy of from one to two or more years between reading age and reading expectancy in relation to the pupils' mental age and grade placement” (Anderson, 1968, p. 134) was used to determine whether a student qualified for additional reading support.

The classroom teacher, having the broadest knowledge of the students' abilities and needs, typically provided remedial reading instruction,

...however, adjustment teachers, special teachers, and remedial teachers who were released from regular classroom duties were used in remedial classes ranging in duration from one-half hour to an hour, and in frequency from daily to twice a week. The remedial reading program functioned in group activities and in individual instruction (Anderson, 1968, p.134).

While the term “reading specialist” was not used until the latter portion of the last century, a move toward specialization in the preparation of teachers of reading was apparent in the designation of remedial reading directors and teachers whose teaching responsibilities focused on providing reading instruction rather than general education. The remedial reading director was responsible for coordinating the work of these individuals, in addition to her responsibilities for reading instruction.

The demand for improved reading programs in schools, and increased reading proficiency for individual students led reading specialists to function in multiple roles, or to vary the focus of their roles over time. Reading specialists’ roles shifted and changed between instructor and consultant as the needs of students and teachers changed (Bean & Wilson, 1981). These shifts occurred over four decades, beginning in the early 1920s. In the 1930s, reading teachers worked as consultants to classroom teachers with the goal of improving reading programs in schools by increasing student reading achievement in the areas of decoding, comprehension, oral reading, and vocabulary (Anderson, 1968) and by working to improve the quality of classroom instruction (Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003). During the 1940s and 1950s, remedial reading teachers worked with individuals or small groups of students who were experiencing difficulty with reading. Remedial reading instruction was administered by the classroom teacher, remedial teachers, and college students who “...had laboratory courses in remedial reading” in the period between 1950 and 1964 (Anderson, 1968, p. 168).

### **Reading Specialists in Recent Times**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, “remedial” reading teachers (Bean, 1979, p. 409) worked with students almost exclusively, while the “reading specialist” (Bean, 1979, p. 409) worked with teachers rather than students. These two designations described the work of some

reading professionals, yet many others performed roles that blurred the distinction of reading teacher or reading specialist, especially those whose work included responsibility for the schoolwide reading program. “Many factors contribute to the differing role emphasis: the type of program, the expectations of a specific institution or agency, as well as the qualifications and values of the individual assuming the role” (Bean, 1979, p. 409). The needs of the school and the personal characteristics of reading teachers or specialists informed the role(s) they enacted.

In the 1980s, reading specialists’ roles began to shift from instruction to consultant and school leadership in response to federal guidelines under *The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975* (Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003). Schools, especially those receiving Title1/Chapter 1 funds, were under scrutiny for failure to provide adequate instructional opportunities for economically disadvantaged students. The guidelines called for greater congruence between reading specialists and classroom teachers (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989; Allington, 1994). Thus, many reading specialists redesigned their pull-out reading programs and provided their reading instruction by pushing-in to classrooms. Additionally, schools improved procedures for the collection and use of student data, professional development for teachers, and supervision of the schoolwide reading program. Reading specialists served as a resource to teachers, assessed students, developed and implemented professional development for teachers, and provided leadership, especially for the reading program, thus enabling reading specialists to support a greater number of teachers and students.

Because of these changes, and to further identify the types of leadership roles reading specialists performed, the International Reading Association (IRA) published its first position statement regarding reading specialists’ work. The *Statement of Roles, Responsibilities, and Qualifications for Reading Specialists* (IRA, 1968; Bean & Wilson, 1981), differentiated reading

specialists' work into four categories: reading teachers, reading clinicians, reading consultants, and reading supervisors. At this time, reading teachers worked directly with students to provide extra instruction while reading clinicians conducted diagnostic assessments and planned and/or conducted more intensive interventions with students. Reading consultants and reading supervisors worked directly with teachers. Reading consultants developed and implemented the reading program while supervisors held leadership responsibilities for the reading program throughout the school. Today, reading specialists' roles span a continuum from instructor to consultant to coordinator (Dietrich, 1967) with many reading specialists performing a combination of these four roles in their work (Quatroche, Bean, & Hamilton, 2001).

In 1992, Barclay and Thistlethwaite published a study examining the types of professional training reading specialists received and elucidated "real" (Barclay & Thistlethwaite, 1992, p. 90) responsibilities such as teaching, assessment, and communicating with teachers from perceived "ideal" (Barclay & Thistlethwaite, 1992, p. 90) responsibilities such as acting as a resource to teachers and organization and administration of the school reading program. Those responsibilities grouped as "real" were valued as important or very important by survey respondents while respondents also desired to incorporate "ideal" roles into their existing responsibilities the future, without devaluing their current roles. Their "ideal" roles would reflect a combination of teaching and leadership.

Not even 10 years later, the International Reading Association (IRA) (2000) published a position statement entitled *Teaching All Children to Read: The Roles of the Reading Specialist*. This statement identified and clarified the roles and responsibilities of reading specialists that Barclay and Thistlethwaite (1992) identified and updated previous IRA position statements dating back to the 1960s (IRA, 1986; 2000a). This position statement was created to publicize

the ongoing need for elementary reading specialists to work with classroom teachers and to provide leadership for reading instruction leading to student achievement. An additional purpose stated in the document was to preserve the integrity of the position by establishing expectations for advanced degrees and a minimum of experience in the classroom.

According to this newer position statement, reading specialists were uniquely qualified to serve in instructional and leadership roles to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, provide proactive intervention to avoid numerous referrals to special education services, and “produce better reading achievement” (IRA, 2000, p. 2). This move may, in part, have been a response to the Goals 2000 (U.S. Congress, 1993-1994) initiative that called for teachers to have more authority and responsibility for student learning (McGill-Franzen, 2000). Reading specialists with leadership responsibilities were poised to meet these expectations. The International Reading Association recommended that reading specialists hold appropriate graduate education credentials, certificates, or degrees as determined by their state education department and that they demonstrate the proficiencies listed in the document. It noted that the role of the reading specialist should require “an integrated, sustained, and rigorous preparation program” (IRA, 2000b, p. 116).

The position statement recommended that reading specialists have classroom teaching experience to enhance their understanding of classroom instruction and a better sense of the classroom teachers’ role. The IRA statement, and a concurrent review of the literature conducted by Quatroche, Bean, and Hamilton (2001), described multiple roles, ranging from instruction or teaching to professional development to a more formal leadership role. This document promoted the work of reading specialists as teachers “...who have specialized training related to addressing reading difficulties and who can give guidance to classroom teachers” (Snow, Burns, & Griffin,

1998, p. 333; IRA, 1998, p. 2) and as leaders in developing the reading program to ensure its effectiveness for all students.

In 1996, the International Reading Association commissioned a national survey of reading specialists (Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Shelton, & Wallis, 2002). The survey was conducted in response to criticism of the effectiveness of Title 1/Chapter 1 reading programs and of the lack of congruence between classroom teaching and intervention, first noted a decade earlier. This survey was designed "...to investigate what reading specialists do so that we could better understand how they provide services to students and teachers" (Bean et al., 2002, p. 737). The survey was sent to International Reading Association members who identified as reading teachers or reading specialists.

Respondents were white (97%), female (98%), and employed full-time in schools (91%) (Bean et al., 2002). Most of them (70%) majored in elementary education and held certification as reading specialists (90%). Many respondents (76%) were experienced, having taught for over 5 years, and a majority had experience as classroom teachers (86%). These results confirmed that reading specialists continued to perform within the previously identified four major functions, in instruction, assessment, resource, and administration. Virtually all respondents provided daily instruction and assessment as required in their schools. Many reading specialists served in a resource role daily, and leadership responsibilities, whether formal or informal, filled portions of reading specialists' time daily or frequently.

Finally, the survey asked reading specialists to express their views about their primary responsibilities, and any changes to their roles over the past five years (Bean et al., 2002). Respondents stated that their instructional, assessment, and resource roles were very important to their work and to improving literacy achievement in their schools. They reported themselves

satisfied with levels of support from teachers and administrators in general; however, they were not as satisfied with the amount of time available for planning with teachers. Some respondents reported that planning with teachers was difficult to schedule, to the extent that they talked with teachers as they passed in the halls. Because of the obstacles to scheduling regular planning times, reading specialists found it challenging to discuss their students' learning, programs, or to plan for instruction with classroom teachers. The greatest area of change was in the amount of paperwork required to meet local and state requirements for accountability. Overall, reading specialists reported increased responsibilities for assessment, professional development and serving as a resource, with no significant decrease in other responsibilities.

Bean, Swan, and Knaub (2003) surveyed principals and reading specialists in schools with exemplary reading programs to investigate leadership roles and analyze how reading specialists functioned in these schools. In the first stage of the study, questionnaires were sent to principals eliciting their views about the importance of reading specialists to the success of their reading program. Principals reported that reading specialists' most valuable tasks included instruction, diagnosis, and serving as resources to teachers. Other tasks included leadership roles, planning with teachers, selecting reading materials, working with allied professionals, coordinating reading programs, developing curriculum, co-teaching, and participating in school-based study teams. Reading specialists in this study "...had responsibility for supporting quality of classroom teaching and for improving the school reading program as a whole" (Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003, p. 449). Principals described reading specialists in their schools as continuous learners who worked with fellow educators to make decisions that affected individual students and the school as a whole. As teachers, they provided intensive and specialized instruction to meet the needs of students.

The second stage of the survey (Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003) involved an interview protocol developed to elicit reading specialists' views about their roles and responsibilities, thus enabling the researchers to obtain an in-depth picture of how reading specialists in these schools functioned. Reading specialists interviewed in this study were overwhelmingly female, with a minimum of 10 years of experience, including classroom teaching experience. All participants held some type of credential, certification, master's degree, endorsement, training, or equivalent in advanced reading education. All but one of these reading specialists had instructional and leadership responsibilities, specifically, serving as a resource to teachers, providing materials, making instructional recommendations, mentoring new teachers, providing professional development, and serving as a liaison to other school personnel and/or parents. About half of them worked with volunteers in schools; a few reading specialists were involved in coordination of the reading program or curriculum development. Conducting assessments and developing assessment tools were also major responsibilities.

As the preceding review hints, reading specialists have been identified by various titles: reading/literacy specialist, reading teacher/interventionist, reading/literacy coach, or supervisor (Bean, et al., 2015). Reading/literacy specialists' and reading teachers/interventionists' primary responsibility was to provide instruction and work directly with students while reading/literacy coaches and supervisors supported teachers and provided leadership for the school's reading program. Additionally, reading/literacy specialists fulfilled roles as resource to teachers and they provided leadership for the reading program in schools. In some schools, the titles reading/literacy specialist and reading teacher have been used synonymously to indicate those who work with students. In the survey conducted by Bean, et al. (2015), the title reading interventionist identified those teachers who provided RTI instruction and support to students.



Under the federal initiative Reading First, many schools receiving Reading First funds designated reading specialists or classroom teachers as reading/literacy coaches. These individuals were responsible for supporting classroom teachers, mentoring teachers, and providing ongoing professional development in reading instruction and pedagogy.

The titles alluded to the role or roles that made up an individual's primary responsibility, yet many individuals fulfilled multiple roles (Bean, et al., 2015). In New York State, colleges and universities offer a master's degree program for reading/literacy specialist and the state confers certification as a reading/literacy specialist (New York State Education Department, 2015) upon successful completion of the program. This study focused on those individuals who called themselves reading specialists because the title, reading specialist, has been used historically and has continued to name the work done by those individuals in schools.

Reading specialists' titles have varied, yet their responsibilities have remained essentially unchanged over time, including a mix of teaching and leadership. While their role remained relatively static, the existing focus on remediation of students' reading difficulties shifted to a focus on the prevention of reading difficulties. This shift in focus led to a corresponding shift in attention from the intermediate elementary grades, where remediation was deemed necessary, to the primary grades. Reading specialists and classroom teachers provided reading instruction designed to support students' developing reading skills. To meet the demands that accompanied these shifts, some reading specialists took on new roles as reading coaches, in order to support classroom teachers and the reading program.

### **Current Scholarship on Reading Specialists and Coaches**

Reading achievement and the prevention of reading difficulties were of dual focus during the No Child Left Behind legislation era (U.S. Congress, 2001-2002; U.S. Department of

Education, 2014). Under NCLB, Reading First grant funds were available to selected schools for their K-3 reading programs. Reading specialists employed in elementary schools receiving such funds focused much of their attention on improving classroom reading instruction. These individuals, and others newly hired in some schools, were called reading coaches because they focused primarily on supporting classroom teachers. During this time, Response to Intervention (RTI) was enacted to identify levels of need for reading support. Reading specialists were among those educators whose qualifications and focus on literacy suited them for this type of instruction (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). Recently, Race to the Top focused attention on the reading achievement of all students with the goal of preparing them to be college and career ready as graduates (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The studies reviewed here reflect the shifts in title and in responsibilities that occurred during this time.

Galloway and Lesaux (2014) synthesized the research conducted since 2001 about the roles assumed by reading specialists. Their literature review synthesis identified three key themes related to reading specialists' roles, namely, (1) reading specialists filled multiple roles from teaching to resource to leadership, and they experienced varying levels of comfort with those roles, (2) reading specialists' roles were viewed differently by various school personnel, and (3) the school context shaped the way those roles were enacted.

According to this study (Galloway & Lesaux, 2014), reading specialists functioned in multiple roles, some of which they were unprepared to take on. Their lack of preparation resulted from shifts in demands following newly enacted federal initiatives, such as No Child Left Behind Act (2002), especially for those reading specialists whose primary role shifted from instruction to coaching. In addition to feeling unprepared to take on these roles, some reading

specialists felt uncomfortable working with adult learners, especially when that work included evaluation of reading instruction, as it did in the case of some instructional coaches.

This study also suggested that reading specialists and administrators sometimes held differing ideas about reading specialists' roles (Galloway & Lesaux, 2014). Administrators saw reading specialists as teacher mentors or as program directors. Reading specialists serving in a mentor role supported classroom teachers and helped them improve their instruction.

Administrators who viewed reading specialists as program directors relied on these individuals to supervise and make decisions about the schoolwide reading program to improve overall reading achievement. Regardless of the roles with which their administrators aligned them, reading specialists identified teaching and collaboration with colleagues as their primary responsibilities. Other responsibilities were considered important but were secondary to their work with students and teachers colleagues.

Finally, Galloway and Lesaux (2014) also suggested that national initiatives, including No Child Left Behind Act (2002), the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), and the Common Core Learning Standards (2010) associated with Race to the Top led to greater specificity in naming the work reading specialists performed, and to the fact that some reading specialists were called interventionists while others became coaches. Despite the narrowed descriptors, the general term reading specialist remained in place or was coupled with coach (reading specialist/coach).

It is not that the traditional role of the reading specialist (as student-centered instructor) has been replaced by non-instructional roles; rather, it is the case that reading specialists are simply assuming more non-instructional responsibilities in addition to fulfilling the traditional role of the reading teacher (Galloway & Lesaux, 2014, p. 519).

Reading specialists performed multiple functions in schools, based, in part, on the needs within the schools in which they worked. For some, the administrator determined the responsibilities assigned to the reading specialist while others collaborated with administrators and colleagues to shape their roles. These factors, school type, performance, and culture each contributed to determining which roles reading specialists enacted in their schools.

Calo and her colleagues (2015) surveyed K-12 reading/literacy coaches and reading specialists across the United States to elicit information about their perception of themselves as leaders, their leadership responsibilities, and their preparation for leadership. Most literacy coaches/reading specialists (93%) reported responsibility for literacy leadership; all of these respondents considered themselves leaders at the school level, while 66% of these coaches/specialists believed their leadership extended beyond their school to the district level. Leadership took on various aspects including instructional support, supporting teachers, decision-making, data analysis, and providing resources. Other responsibilities included professional development for colleagues and serving on committees. While the composition of their work varied, individuals serving in these leadership roles were responsible for influencing reading achievement and effecting change in schools.

Based on their review of the literature, Calo and her colleagues (2015) identified “competence” and “character” as two areas of significance for reading specialists/coaches who served in leadership roles. “Competence” was defined as the knowledge and skills that enabled reading specialists/coaches to perform their jobs and support their colleagues. Knowledge of district policies and practices and an ability to understand district needs, initiatives, and philosophies enhanced their leadership work. “Character” included interpersonal skills, such as the ability to collaborate, be flexible, build trust, and present a positive outlook and attitude.

These character traits were considered vital as reading specialists/coaches worked to build relationships with teachers, support teachers and students, and improve the reading program. According to Calo and her colleagues, reading specialists/coaches perceived a responsibility to be literacy leaders in their schools. Those reading specialists/coaches who embodied aspects of the competencies and characteristics they identified were better prepared to accomplish their leadership roles.

Service as a leader in a literacy program has been an expectation for many reading specialists and literacy coaches. For reading specialists, responsibility for leadership roles often developed as they supported teachers and took responsibility for literacy programs (Bean, Knaub, & Swan, 2000; Bean, 2004). Literacy coaches, on the other hand, stepped into leadership as a key component of their role in schools (Calo, Sturtevant, & Kopfman, 2015). The functions these specialists and coaches fulfilled were based on identified needs within their schools, thus their roles varied, based on those perceived needs.

Bean and her colleagues (2015) conducted a national survey to inform teacher educators and district leaders about the ways reading coaches function in schools and the challenges they face as they enact those roles. According to that survey, literacy professionals served in four role-groups: instructional/ literacy coach, reading teacher/interventionist, reading/literacy specialist, and supervisor. Within these role-groups, literacy professionals performed duties similar to those of their predecessors, specifically, coordinating literacy programs, coaching, and teaching, with additional responsibilities such as analyzing data, facilitating teacher groups, and conducting workshops.

According to the Bean and colleague (2015) study, reading/literacy specialists and reading teacher/interventionists continued to perform roughly the same four roles that they have

played over time, including instruction, assessment (with the inclusion of data analysis), support for teachers (resource to teachers), and leadership. “Those who self-identified as reading specialists were the most diverse in terms of role expectations, with responsibilities ranging from working primarily with students to working as coaches or even as coordinators” (Bean, et al., 2015, p. 97-98). Instructional and literacy coaches and supervisors rarely provided instruction to students, yet they facilitated teacher groups and supervisors conducted workshops or provided professional development for teachers. Coaches reported coaching teachers as a formalized role yet over half of the total participants surveyed, including those who did not identify as coaches, reported supporting teachers in other formal or informal ways.

This survey also reported on literacy professionals’ preparation and their “wish list” topics for desired preparation. Of those surveyed, three-quarters of professionals held a master’s degree in literacy or other related areas. Their “wish list” included preparation in “leadership” with resounding agreement and included suggestions for preparation programs to include field experiences, opportunities to observe or shadow literacy professionals, and a call for training as coaches with embedded cycles of coaching and feedback. This last suggestion was common across all role-groups and was viewed as necessary, due to the increased call for literacy professionals to support classroom teachers.

Studies of reading specialists’ work in schools suggest that legislation evaluating schools and, subsequently, teachers, based on students’ reading achievement, has helped sustain their positions in schools over time. Reading specialists fill teaching and leadership roles to support students, classroom teachers, and school-wide literacy programs, yet there is neither a clearly delineated title nor a set of responsibilities associated with this role. Educational policy and various reforms (e.g., No Child Left Behind, Response to Intervention, and Race to the Top)

have led to the creation of new titles to describe these positions. These titles, such as interventionist, reading coach or literacy coach, attempt to bring clarity to the types of instruction or leadership roles(s) these individuals enact.

The studies reviewed herein provide insight into current roles enacted by reading specialists and reading coaches. These roles reflect responsibilities similar to those attributed to reading specialists in earlier times, with expectations for teaching or leadership, dependent upon their specific school's needs. Additionally, they help us envision qualities and characteristics reading specialists and coaches possess and acknowledge areas for further learning by which these individuals may benefit.

### **Summary**

Previous research suggests that reading specialists serve in elementary schools in four key roles. They provide reading intervention and instruction to students, primarily those students who are experiencing difficulty with reading. At times, they work within the classroom as co-teachers or as a resource to classroom teachers. Many reading specialists are responsible for administration and coordination of assessments, especially screening students, monitoring progress, assessment, data analysis and reporting to teachers and administration. Reading specialists serve as a resource to teachers by providing formal and informal professional development and support in classrooms to increase students' reading achievement. As leaders, reading specialists take on quasi-administrative responsibilities such as curriculum coordination and planning, committee leadership, mentoring, and responsibility for the literacy programs in schools and at the district level. The specific role or roles each individual enacts are informed by a combination of forces, including the building administrator's expectations, the needs of teachers and students, and the qualities and characteristics of the reading specialist her/himself.

### **Sociocultural Aspects of Reading Specialists' Work**

Many forces shape individuals, those of which we are aware and those of which we are unaware. These forces include, but are not limited to, culture, gender, race, and social class. Elementary school teachers and reading specialists are predominantly White middle class women (Galman & Mallozzi, 2012; Carter, 2007; Tallerico, 2007) who may or may not explicitly question their identity, their position within the school, or the social affinities they bring to their work each day that shape their identity and situate them within society. Such forces also contribute to each individual's enactment of her/his roles and responsibilities as a reading specialist. It is important to consider how reading specialists' backgrounds situate them to work with other teachers, as well as with other people's children, who may be from a variety of backgrounds that do not align with the circumstances of the instructional staff, including reading specialists.

In a recent study, Lori Assaf (2016) explored the identity construction of a pre-service teacher. In her case study, Assaf described the ways that historical, cultural, and social forces acted upon and shaped Adrianna's developing teacher identity, stating that "...becoming a teacher is an identity-forming process" (Assaf, 2016, p. 207). Similarly, in a study of literacy coaches, Rainville & Jones (2008) noted that their identities as teachers reflected the situated context of the coach's responsibilities, as well as the needs and expectations of the teachers with whom the coach worked at any given time. The findings in these identity studies support recent research arguing that reading specialists' and coaches' roles are shaped by institutional and social forces (Galloway & Lesaux, 2014).

Institutional and social forces inform our perceptions of teachers, curricula, and the purposes for reading instruction in schools (Cole & Griffin, 1983). These perceptions suggest



that the educational system has failed, based upon a variety of assessment data that reduce reading proficiency to a single score. For example, the latest data from National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) show little growth, at the elementary level, in reading achievement over the last decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). This notion of educational failure (in reading) is predicated upon a narrow view of reading as mastery of skills for decoding and comprehension that fails to consider reading as a means of mediating and theorizing about the world (Cole & Griffin, 1983). Thus, reading is limited to an academic endeavor, and instruction is provided to support decoding and comprehension as a set of skills to be mastered in isolation rather than skills learned in aid of reading as a way of knowing the world.

Reading achievement, or lack thereof, was determined by a numeric cut score that identified students in need of remediation in reading (Johnston & Allington, 1991) who were viewed as having a reading deficit (McGill-Franzen, 2000). In this light, remediation consisted of skill-based instruction to address areas of deficit: decoding, comprehension, or a combination of decoding and comprehension (Frankel & Pearson, 2014). Reading specialists provided remedial instruction through programs (e.g., Chapter 1, Reading First), tiered instruction (e.g., Response to Intervention (RTI)), and in response to state assessment data (e.g., Academic Intervention Services (AIS)).

Recent scholarship argues for a reimagining of re-mediation as opportunity to use text as a means to theorize about the world (Cole & Griffin, 1983) and to engage students as empowered and motivated learners (Alvermann, 2003). According to Luke and Elkins (2000), remediation implies a need to “fix” students’ reading difficulties while re/mediation changes the conditions under which students learned by mediating their engagement with text as a means to interact with their world. Teaching as re/mediation engages students in learning opportunities that are

social and cultural. Through the use of various texts (including song lyrics, poetry, and multimedia), students draw on their funds of knowledge to interact in dialogue with peers. Re/mediated learning deepened students' interactions with text (Cole & Griffin, 1983) and increased their self-efficacy as confident and competent learners (Alvermann, 2003).

### **Gender and the Reading Specialist**

In their complex roles, reading specialists are often perceived as champions of struggling readers in light of standards that position some students as successful and others as “at risk” (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson & Hickman, 2003). Such work, focused as it is on intensive instruction and support of students' reading achievement, seems heroic at times. A student whose reading achievement shows significant progress resulting from a reading specialist's instruction may appear to have been “saved” from failure through the intervention. Reading specialists' work, then, can characterize them as nurturing, caring, feminine, and heroic figures. Education has been feminized and devalued because it is often viewed as women's work. Elementary teaching in particular is construed in this light where care is perceived as a sign of weakness and thus feminized (Warin & Gannerud, 2014). Over time, this view became normalized, leading to elementary school teaching positions filled primarily by women.

Some feminist scholars (Biklen, 1995; Theobald, 1999; Weiler, 1998; 1999) have acknowledged the commitment of teachers to their students and the ways that teachers act in their students' best interests. They noted that this commitment may be identified as heroic, as in the case where student success is unanticipated or exceeds all expectations. However, this perspective suggested that heroism exists within the every-day efforts of the typical teacher to encourage and support students' learning. Teachers who build relationships with students, know their strengths and support them in meeting expectations despite challenges that may exist are

heroes in their schools and communities. Biklen (1995) described this commitment as “going beyond the call of duty” (p.3): teachers act in heroic ways when they do not limit their efforts to those prescribed in their job descriptions but work to effect change for their students and in the schools where they work. These examples challenge the notion of heroism as a show of masculine strength rather, they characterize heroism as the everyday commitment of teachers whose work benefits students.

More recently, Warin and Gannerud (2014) challenged the notion that caring is women’s work. Too often caring has been diminished and devalued, perceived solely as women’s work, pertaining to domesticity and child rearing. Then, following that thinking, women were best suited to care for, or nurture, younger children because of their predisposition to be mother-like, thus fitting them to serve as elementary teachers responsible for the care and instruction of young children. Warin and Gannerud (2014) traced the ways that the construct of care has been reproduced across generations of teachers and students to become part of the discourse of schooling. They suggest that these discursive constructs will continue to reproduce within classrooms and elementary schools where women predominate in adult roles as teachers, administrators, and support staff until they are challenged and rewritten. The authors expanded the notion of care beyond personal interactions so that it pertains to society at large. In this view, women and men have an equal responsibility to give and to receive care. Caring for the environment is an example of this construct where all members of society might contribute. Then, the discourse of caring could be rewritten as strength.

Christine Mallozzi (2011) wrote an autoethnography of her experience teaching upper elementary boys that positioned her as an object of potential romantic interest in the minds of her adolescent students. Later, she learned of this from a students’ mother. Mallozzi reflected

concern about the ways one's body and one's movements can be viewed and evaluated for appropriate/inappropriateness in the moment and from a distance of both time and space.

Seeing a teacher as an embodied person with a dynamic life crosses the boundaries set by a stagnant, iconic image of teacher. One way to work against this iconic image is to acknowledge that teachers display embodied action and situated images (Mallozzi, 2011, p. 131).

Mallozzi suggested that her experience called to mind expectations that women in the classroom should appear sexless, with the notion that calling attention to the fact that one possesses a body might lead students astray – at the very least, distract them from their learning. The sense of control over the bodies of those who inhabit schools, students as well as teachers, especially female teachers, may privilege those who conform to the expected image and marginalize those whose appearance, race, class (dis)ability, illness, or other attributes run counter to the images of conformity. In any school, some teachers will conform in appearance to the expected social markers while others resist the expectation. Whether one chooses to conform or not, or to what degree, may have implications regarding one's sense of acceptance within a school culture.

Tallerico (2007) discussed the gender stratification prevalent in schools that identified women as teachers and men as leaders. This trend has remained relatively static for the last century, although, over time women have taken on leadership roles in elementary schools but remain in the minority when compared to male leaders at high school and superintendent levels. Women staff elementary schools primarily, thereby perpetuating the stereotype that these women provide the nurturing, supportive setting young children need for learning to take place. While women have increased in number as teachers in grades 7-12, men predominate as administrators at this same level, with the position of superintendent primarily held by men. Tallerico (2007)

warned that continued stratification, reinforcing gendered roles in the minds of K-12 students, would persist unless it is challenged and identified as the gendered model it is.

According to Carter (2007), data from the 2000 US Census Report indicates that women formed a significant majority (75%) and were most likely to serve as principals at the elementary level (55%). In the state in which this study was conducted, women occupy 89% of the elementary teaching positions, and 60% of elementary schools are led by women. Tallerico (2007) suggested that the greater number of woman administrators at the elementary level was in keeping with the traditionally gendered view of education, in that women filled those elementary leadership positions while men filled administrative roles at the high school and superintendent levels.

Warin & Gannerud (2014) described how the constructs of feminization and masculinization have been applied to teaching. As a construct, feminization has been identified with the predominance of women teachers in elementary schools, classrooms, and other adult spaces in those schools, and the alignment of feminization with the construct of care. On the other hand, the masculinization of teaching has been identified with a greater focus on mastery of content knowledge, high test scores and cognitive achievement (Coffey & Delamont, 2000; Warin & Gannerud, 2014). Warin & Gannerud (2014) suggested that a willingness to extend the feminine notions of caring and nurturing beyond the elementary level would foster social and emotional skill development as students grew into adult citizens. The authors suggest that such development and resultant student growth would aid in dispelling some of the genderification prevalent in today's schools (Warin & Gannerud, 2014).

### **Intersections of Race and Class in Reading Specialists' Perspectives**

Elementary schools remain largely staffed by White women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009) whose salary scale and educational achievements place them among those of middle class status (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). The gendered nature of elementary schools is reinforced because women fill most administrative roles in those schools (Tallerico, 2007). White, middle class status confers a presumption of privilege upon many elementary teachers, such that their life experiences may run counter to those of their students, thus creating potential for teachers to be colorblind to the marginalization of people of color, those living in poverty, or those who are differently-abled (Collins, 1998).

Schools and classrooms are often theorized as sites where teachers are situated to perpetuate hegemonic norms of race, class, and ability. Whiteness is normalized in the teaching profession, thus White women find themselves readily taking on identities as teachers. They perceive themselves as role models and desire to make a difference in the lives of children (Schick, 2000). At the same time, the "...unspoken norms by which teacher identities are organized and unwittingly reproduced as cultural practices of racial domination" (Schick, 2000, p. 300) continue to perpetuate themselves in schools. Those who choose to disrupt those norms reimagine the classroom as a space where new norms are established (Cochran-Smith, 1995).

The discourse of caring itself perpetuates a racist, White-centric, idealized attitude toward social interactions (Thompson, 1998). This culture of caring has its basis in White, middle-class notions of family where the mother provides for the needs of the family in the home because her income is not required to maintain the family's lifestyle. It fails to acknowledge family structures in which the mother is the sole provider or where her income is needed to provide necessities for the family. These norms, however, have defined caring in schools (Noddings, 2007) and are perpetuated by a system that employs a majority of White women.

Opportunities to balance education's genderization such that attention is paid to individuals' and groups' social and emotional needs (feminization) challenges existing institutional structures (masculinization) that prioritize testing and academic achievement as markers of a school's value (Warin & Gannerud, 2014). A balance of feminine and masculine structures within institutions would move them toward parity. Parity implies even distribution of opportunities such that men and women would have the same rights (e.g., the right to vote) or the same access to education. Equity involves a sense of fairness or justice, which may include different levels of access, in order to achieve desired outcomes for all (Chisamya, et al, 2012).

Similarly, Coffey and Delamont (2000) suggest that a key facet of feminist teaching is the critical reading of historical text to interrogate who is and who is not given notice, especially women and people of color. That is, gender and race intersect as social forces that position individuals in particular ways. As Cho and her colleagues (2013) explained:

Intersectionality's insistence on examining the dynamics of difference and sameness has played a major role in facilitating consideration of gender, race, and other axes of power in a wide range of political discussions and academic disciplines, including new developments in fields such as geography and organizational studies (p.787).

Intersectionality created spaces for consideration of one's identity through multiple lenses, including gender, race, and class, thereby expanding rather than limiting the points of view from which an individual might be described.

Patricia Hill Collins (1998) suggested that a multi-layered view of identity served to dispel hegemonic power structures by viewing an individual as a member of many identity groups, thus disrupting society's tendency to assign individuals to a prescribed group. For example, a Black woman may identify herself as a member of many groups based on her

cultural, racial, gendered, social, political, and economic status. Through each lens, she enacts an aspect of her total identity, each of which contributes to and enriches the whole, whereas a single-layered view shortchanges the totality of one's being through the use of a single identity marker. Intersectionality expands the traditional tendency to collapse multiple facets of identity to a convenient marker (e.g., Black, working class, Woman) to raise awareness that one constructs an identity from multiple layers of self. This expanded awareness is informed by one's experience and sense of self as one responds to social, historical, and institutional forces in the world one inhabits (Baily & Holmarsdottir, 2015).

### **Summary**

Women fill most of the roles in elementary schools to this day, including the roles of reading specialists. Yet the significance of this feminization of teaching often goes unquestioned. Indeed, for many, it remains a matter of women providing the best nurturing early education. Expectations for asexual dress and conformity to established rules of conduct place control over women's bodies in ways that decontextualize mind from body thus creating the need for individuals to mask aspects of their identity in order to conform to established norms of behavior.

Reading specialists, predominantly White females, may reinforce the image of women as nurturing caregiver and heroic teacher and perpetuate the racial inequity prevalent in the reading specialist role. A White female interested in taking on the role of a reading specialist would not question her ability to assume the role, based on her race or her gender, thus perpetuating existing, albeit unspoken, hegemonic norms. Reading specialists presently enacting their roles create a stereotypic norm that often remains unchallenged, thus making individuals collectively complicit in this virtually segregated role.



At the same time, some others have explored the feminization of teaching as a means of bringing social and emotional education into schools to counterbalance the masculinization that focuses on standards, testing, and achievement. The roles played by women in education, especially in elementary schools, raise unanswered questions about women and their physical presence in schools, and about the curricular decisions made at local and state levels regarding educating young citizens, including how literacy instruction is to be provided and tested.

### **CONCLUSION**

The literature on reading specialists suggests that these individuals play what are seen as vital roles in elementary schools. They serve in roles that were shaped and became increasingly necessary as literacy performance standards were established. These standards, either teachers' informal expectations for students' responses to instruction, or formalized as assessment cut scores established to fulfill regulations, have varied over time. To those ends, schools created positions for teachers who could provide instruction or support to enhance students' reading performance. However, the tools they have been given and the isolated, sometimes marginalizing settings in which they have often worked have undercut such work.

Reading specialists serve four primary roles in elementary schools: instruction, assessment, resource to teachers, and leadership. Individuals may perform all of these responsibilities or may limit their work to instruction and assessment, for example. The range and frequency of responsibilities varies, yet these four roles continue to describe the work in which reading specialists engage. These roles shift and change as schools, students, and teachers express varying expectations or needs. Reading specialists' roles may develop and change over time as individuals gain knowledge or experience. Despite variations in expectations, and change over time, reading specialists' key roles essentially remain unchanged.

The literature on gender suggests that elementary schools have employed and continue to employ women in teaching roles. “Teaching as women’s work” is a gendered view that marginalizes the value and importance of teaching, especially elementary education. Feminists bring attention to the inequities associated with the notion that gender determines knowledge, expertise, and pay scale. Current research also examines the “genderfication” of teaching to illuminate feminization as instruction in social-emotional content while masculinization concerns itself with test scores and student achievement in traditional subject areas. Those working in elementary schools sometimes perceive gender issues, but just as often they are unquestioned, even by those marginalized in their work. Like aspects of gender, race and class, and the intersectionality of these three, are similarly unacknowledged as forces at work in society and each of us as individuals. What we don’t understand is how the teaching as women’s work narrative informs the narratives of reading specialists, who are typically White women of middle class status.

Research has shown us what reading specialists do to serve those with whom they work, how most of these are women, who have been and continue to be regarded as educators within school hierarchies, and how narratives can help us understand how people situate their identities as women and teachers in the world in which we live. We also know about reading specialists’ responsibilities for teaching, assessment, resource to teachers, and leadership, and we know that gender has and continues to determine much about the way we view elementary education. But, prior to this study, we had only limited evidence to show how reading specialists narrated their occupation of these roles, or about the influences that shaped them.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### METHOD

This study is grounded in an inquiry into narrative framework. More specifically, it employs inquiry into narrative to make use of individual narratives as a means of understanding individuals' experiences, beliefs, and understandings about the world as they are expressed through the act of narration. At the same time, inquiry into narrative also serves as a framework for seeing smaller narrative segments within the larger narrative as reflective of a story within a story (Reissman, 2008; 1993). The smaller story portrays a focused episode with its own significance, as well as holding meaning within the larger narrative as a whole.

This qualitative interview study used inquiry into narrative (Clandinin, 2007; Montero & Washington, 2011) to explore reading specialists' perspectives as shared through their narration of their work in elementary schools. Reading specialists whose narratives served as the data for this study are described in the following chapters. Their roles as reading specialists in elementary schools were varied and multifaceted because they acted as leaders, served as resources to teacher colleagues, conducted assessments, and provided instruction to students (Bean, et al., 2002; Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003; Dole, 2004).

The first section of this chapter is a description of the participants, how they were recruited, and a general introduction to them as a group. The second section describes how I collected data via interviews, transcription, and initial coding of these interviews. The third section describes inquiry into narrative and data analysis, including how I identified emergent themes and the subsequent development of three overarching tropes describing participant narratives. The fourth and final section shares my perspective as a researcher, including my own subjectivities and situated-ness within this topic.

## **Participants**

Elementary reading specialists were selected for this study because their roles have undergone substantial shifts subsequent to Reading First (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Reading First, and the demand for all students to read on grade level by the end of third grade, led many grant-funded schools to add reading specialist and/or reading coach positions to their K-3 reading programs. Elementary reading specialists or reading coaches whose work supported these programs took on sometimes unfamiliar responsibilities for professional development, coaching classroom teaching peers, and new forms of leadership for the K-3 reading program.

In light of the shifting in reading specialist roles, and the demands placed upon elementary schools for increased reading achievement, this study focused on reading specialists in elementary schools. I chose elementary reading specialists as my participants because their work has historical roots reaching back to the beginning of the previous century (Barry, 1994) and they continue to work in many elementary schools throughout the U.S. (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Bean et al., 2015). I chose to focus on elementary reading specialists in New York State because reading specialists in this state functioned in the varied roles identified in the research. Many elementary schools in New York State received Reading First funds, thus their reading specialists experienced the shifts brought about by the expectations and demands of that grant-driven initiative. Additionally, New York State included elementary schools in densely populated urban areas as well as suburban and rural schools. Student populations ranged from highly racially and culturally diverse to mostly white. Students came from families living in high poverty areas to middle and upper middle class homes.

Participants were recruited for this study through a variety of sources, including contacts at the university and in elementary schools known to me, as well as from other participants.

Emails were sent to literacy education department chairpersons in schools of education across a single state in the northeast U.S. I also contacted reading specialists whom I knew by email and by phone. Three participants were recruited through my networking while the emails sent to department chairs yielded approximately seven potential candidates, three of whom were interested in participating in the study.

Additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling; during the initial interview with each individual, I solicited assistance in identifying other reading specialists who might be potential candidates for participation in the study. Thus, six participants were recruited through my initial email/phone contacts while the remaining sixteen joined the study as a result of participant referral through snowball sampling. I stopped sampling when my data appeared to be saturated, that is, individuals' main narratives seemed to be repeated across sources (Patton, 2001). This snowball sampling yielded almost two-thirds of the total participants. In total, I spent approximately 66 hours interviewing participants, yielding approximately 1260 pages of transcribed interviews.

Table 1 (see Appendix) shows descriptive information about the study participants (all names are pseudonyms), specifically identifying their years working as educators, as reading specialists, their undergraduate and graduate degree concentration areas, as well as their race/ethnicity and their gender. The information in this chart was provided to illustrate some of the similarities among, as well as the range of differences in demographic information between reading specialist participants, and to provide an initial snapshot into the lives of participants, as shared through their narratives. The data represented by this chart were collected during the initial interview with participants.

The title “reading specialist” is used throughout this paper to refer to all participants, even though some participants called themselves “reading teachers” while others used “reading specialists” exclusively or both titles interchangeably. Additionally, “reading specialists” was the title conferred with certification in this state, until 2004, when it was changed to a more inclusive “literacy specialist;” however, most participants in this study completed their requirements prior to 2004 and held the “reading specialist” certification.

**Backgrounds.** In total, twenty-two individuals calling themselves reading specialists participated in this qualitative study. These individuals served as reading specialists in elementary schools from various cities, town, and regions. The majority of participants were White middle class women; however, nearly half of the 22 participants reported coming from working class backgrounds. They varied greatly in terms of their experience as teachers and their experience as reading specialists. Camille, Barb, and Monica were veteran teachers, yet they were quite new to the work of reading specialists, while others, like Lynn and Emma, had little or no classroom teaching experience other than that gained as a reading specialist. Participants ranged greatly in age, four participants were in their early to mid-twenties, eight ranged in age from 30 to approximately 45, and ten women were over 45 years old, some of whom were nearing retirement.

Most of the reading specialists in this study attended college for elementary education. This group includes Paul, Julie, Deb, Barb, Virginia, Stephanie, Bridget, Anna, Peggy, Cheryl, Marie, and Lynn. Katie and Monica had a dual major in elementary education and special education during their undergraduate studies. A few participants, Liz, Nancy, Camille, and Sarah majored in English education, while Katherine majored in elementary music education. Her interest in reading emerged through her work with music students. Emma, Erica, and Susan

planned for careers unrelated to education but altered their career paths during their undergraduate studies to focus on elementary education.

All participants held a master's degree in Reading or Literacy, with the exception of Camille, whose master's degree was in special education. Most participants worked in the field as elementary or secondary classroom teachers prior to embarking on their graduate studies; however a few, Erica, Paul, Julie, and Emma transitioned directly from undergraduate to graduate work. Peggy and Anna worked for more than 10 years in other fields before obtaining their master's degrees in reading and pursuing positions as reading specialists. Camille, the exception to the group, provided reading instruction as an inclusion teacher and in the capacity of resource teacher for over a decade, thus her district considered her experience when they placed her in the position of elementary reading specialist.

### **Inquiry into Narrative**

Examining reading specialists' narratives is one way to capture the multifaceted nature of their work in ways that look at their function within schools, the ways individuals and groups accept or resist expectations for performance and behavior, and the stories they tell about their work. Inquiry into narrative examines "...stories lived and told" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). It operates as the method of studying lived experiences as related by individuals about the topic being researched. Inquiry into narrative reveals what is unspoken, and the importance of difference and perspective (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011). It examines the ways one's story "...mirrors the world rather than copying it exactly" (Riessman, 2008, p.4), thus representing the events, experiences, and emotions of individuals as stories are related. It provides a means of exploring the significance of single events within the larger framework of the narrative and the ways those single events work to weave an interpretative tale that tells of lived experiences.

Storytelling is an age-old means of conveying experiences and their accompanying thoughts and emotions. It serves to impart a message or lesson, inform others about one's identity or perspective, or suggest or incite others to make a change (Riessman, 2008). As a research analysis tool, the participant as narrator relates his/her experiences about a topic or event as a story, to help the listener understand the event(s) and the teller's thoughts, emotions, and responses to those experiences. The participant (narrator) and the researcher (listener) collaborate in the narrative event, ultimately co-creating a text shaped through the interaction of narrator and listener (Clandinin, 2007; Riessman, 2008).

One's interactions with others, whether or not they are work-related, create social situations that shape the narrative of one's experience. "Nor are the stories that we tell simple, unproblematic carriers of 'facts' – rather they are mediated by social, cultural and historical influences" (Trahar, 2008). Teacher narratives describe many aspects of their work lives, helping us understand how they perceive their identity (McVee, 2004), their work as teachers and their perception of conflicts within that role (Quan, Phillion, & He, 1999), their work with students (Huber, 1999), and the intersection of their lives and experiences (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007). The stories teachers tell provide a window into social, institutional, and historical situations and events that shape their teaching lives.

Interpretation of events is contextualized, dependent upon one's situation and the lens through which events are viewed. Thus, a narrative event is "usually expressed as a kind of uncertainty" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 31) in its telling. Yet, stories are told to make sense of the world around us, and to share in the interchange of ideas—to understand the complex nature of being human and, for the purposes of this study, to understand the nature of reading specialists' work from their perspectives.



Montero and Washington (2011) described narrative inquiry and inquiry into narrative as research methods. While narrative inquiry and inquiry into narrative use stories as data, they treat the data differently during analysis. Narrative inquiry, as theory and method, explores stories, situated temporally, spatially, and socially, to help us understand the world. Inquiry into narrative uses qualitative methods, such as those consistent with grounded theory (Glazer & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), to uncover common elements and themes from participants' stories. This study employed inquiry into narrative to explore the commonalities among and the range of experiences between reading specialists' stories of their work.

### **Data Collection**

This qualitative study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the source for data collection. Because narrative analysis requires collecting people's narratives, I conducted three one-hour, in-depth, semi-structured interviews, with each participant in-person and/or by phone, based on each participant's preference and availability. Conducting multiple interviews enabled me to build a rapport with the participants over time. Thus, participants and I had opportunity to reflect upon previous conversations and to explore current questions and thoughts with a sense of continuity across interview sessions.

Because the purpose of this study was to explore the narratives of elementary reading specialists, I chose interview as the means of data collection to create spaces where participants could "...give meaning to and express their understandings of their experiences" (Mischler, 1986). Inquiry into narrative, as a research method, placed the participants at the center of their stories, as both the storyteller and the central character in that story. Interviews provided a means of capturing those stories. As the researcher, I became the listener who would later recount those stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Qualitative research provides opportunities to explore the ways others make sense of their lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The research question guiding this study was asked to gain insight into reading specialists' perspectives of their work and the influences that shaped that work. Specifically, interview questions asked: 1) Tell me about your work as a reading specialist, 2) Tell me about your work with students, colleagues, administrators, 3) Describe the characteristics of a "good" reading specialist. Other questions included requests for participants to describe any politics connected to their work and something they would like to change about their job. Participants were also asked to provide their thoughts about why most elementary reading specialists were White females. (See Appendix, Table 1.)

The interview questions were derived from my research question and asked participants to talk about their work, their school or institutional setting, and the social and political aspects of their work as reading specialists. The existing literature on the roles enacted by reading specialists informed the composition of questions that asked participants to tell about their work in schools. These questions were written as open-ended questions to elicit participants' narratives and to allow them, as much as possible, to control the direction of the narrative conversation. To help achieve that end, I did not establish a hierarchy for the interview questions. Instead, questions were asked based on the flow of conversation if they seemed to fit the topic at hand, or when introduction of a new question seemed appropriate to the conversation. All interview questions were posited over the course of the three interview sessions.

Participant interviews were conducted in-person or, in some cases, by phone as determined by the participants' availability or when lack of proximity made in-person interviews prohibitive (See Table 1 for participant interview method). Interviews were conducted between

2007-2010; in some cases three interviews were completed within a six-month period while other participants' schedules required as much as a year between interviews.

Interviews with each participant were recorded and then transcribed. I transcribed approximately one-third of the interviews (primarily the initial interview with each participant) and the remaining interviews were transcribed by a transcription service. I reviewed transcriptions of each interview to compare interview recordings with the transcribed document. Transcription errors—names of reading programs, assessments, and the like—were adjusted to reflect participants' narratives. I reviewed individual participant's narrative transcripts prior to our second and third interviews to identify any clarifying or follow-up questions I might have and to re-orient myself to the individual's story. To check for understanding and accuracy with each participant, I reviewed bits of the data from previous interviews and I invited participants to ask any questions they might have from previous interview sessions. I shared a few key ideas from earlier interviews to re-establish certain topics, especially those that participants' narratives developed with thoroughness during the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

Following each interview, participant's narrative(s) were transcribed and read using constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for initial coding, based on the research question and the interview questions. Transcripts were reread before subsequent interviews to identify questions or topics for discussion in the upcoming interview session. In this way, similarities and differences, and the range of responses around those similarities and differences, emerged and developed over multiple readings.

A key aspect of inquiry into narrative as method strives to maintain the integrity of the narrative, using the participant's words when possible (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin,

2007; Reissman, 2008). To that end, data analysis was conducted in a recursive manner, through multiple readings of participant narratives. Narratives were read individually to remain as true as possible to the participant's story, and they were read collectively to identify trends emerging from the data over multiple readings. This process enabled me to capture the broad strokes of each participant's narrative as well as the nuances of the smaller episode or event within that individual's greater narrative. Then the entire data set was reviewed multiple times to establish categories and initial codes and to refine and collapse initial codes into themes.

During the initial reading of each transcript, I looked for responses that aligned specifically with the interview questions derived from my research question. I coded these responses with key words from the questions asked. Those sections of the narratives that linked to historical, institutional, or sociocultural aspects of individual's work were coded with "historical," "institutional" or "sociocultural" as appropriate. As the number of participants and transcripts increased, I began reading across participant narratives for commonalities as well as variance of responses around an idea or topic. I created semantic maps of terms, identifying trends (related terms) in the data by highlighting them with matching color. These trends of related terms were refined or collapsed into better-defined categories, ultimately emerging as narrative themes reflective of participants' experiences as reading specialists. I re-read transcripts to test the themes and to identify participants whose experiences were closely aligned as well as those whose experiences showed a range within a given theme. I grouped these themes into three categories or overarching themes, based on my research question, thus the categories were titled: historical, institutional, and sociocultural. I created a matrix with the three overarching themes as headings; under each heading I listed the subthemes as they related to the research question overarching themes (See Appendix, Table 2).

With these subthemes in the matrix, I returned to my participants' narratives and began identifying individuals by each narrative's connection to the subthemes. I wrote descriptions of each group of individuals, based on the subthemes and returned to the transcripts to verify the appropriateness of my categorizations. After additional reading across participant narratives and among multiple participants, three story lines, or tropes, emerged as serving to capture the varying foci of the narratives of these reading specialists about their work. I used tropes, defined as cognitive tools, which help people understand the world and express that understanding (Nerlich & Burkhardt, 2010), to describe these story lines. The use of tropes aided my ability to share participants' narratives and to encapsulate participants' views of their primary role as reading specialists. These tropes focused on their (a) leadership and authority, (b) finding a niche in one's work environment, and (c) teaching and collaborating with colleagues. Each trope reflected the storyline of a group of participants, yet within each trope participant narratives showed both similarity and diversity in their breadth of experience.

With these tropes identified, I re-read selections of participants' transcripts to determine which trope dominated their narratives, even while acknowledging that all participants' stories included some aspects of all tropes. Various facets of the narratives and repeated words or phrases aided my categorization. To represent the breadth and depth of each trope, I selected one participant narrative to represent each trope, and then I drew on to the remaining narratives to illustrate the range of experience and perspective within each trope. All narratives told by these reading specialist participants reflected the complexity of their work lives, yet three participants, Emma, Erica, and Paul shared narratives that proved particularly rich representations of the tropes into which they were grouped.

I then read across individual's transcripts within and across the tropes to consider how the narratives related to the research question, specifically, how the narratives in each trope addressed the historical, institutional and sociocultural aspects of reading specialists' work. I identified sections of participant narratives that illustrated these aspects of their work and the variations among participants with regard to these aspects as well. I note that I don't mean to essentialize participants by categorizing their narratives within one trope; though each participant's narrative reflected a dominant trope, all participants referenced all tropes.

Titles for the three dominant tropes, namely leadership, finding a niche, and teaching and collaborating, were drawn from participant narratives and from their attempts to describe their jobs. Each participant told stories of acting as leaders, settling into their work, teaching, and collaborating with others, yet each individual's narrative conveyed vignettes that illustrated how leadership, finding a niche, or teaching and collaborating figured most prominently in their work as reading specialists. Participant narratives which foregrounded responsibilities as leaders or as teachers and collaborators echoed the types of responsibilities found in the literature on reading specialists (Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003; Bean, et al., 2015). I used leadership and teaching and collaborating as titles for two of the tropes because participants' stories and reading specialists' roles, as suggested in the research, corresponded in the ways these roles were described. The title for the remaining trope, finding a niche, was suggested by narratives in this study which described participants' efforts to establish themselves in their work and to align their work- and out-of-work lives.

I organized my findings chapters to delve into each trope. For example, in Chapter Four, "Leadership," I draw on Emma's narrative to represent those reading specialists for whom leadership was a central focus, whether formally or informally. Emma's narrative positions her

as holding a key leadership role that drives her work as a reading teacher, thus her narrative portrays the most formalized leadership position held by participants in this trope. Then, Chapter Five: “Finding a Niche,” describes Paul’s narrative to represent participants who found that the reading specialist role provided a degree of flexibility that allowed them to meet the demands of their work- and out-of-work lives. Paul’s full-time teaching position as a reading specialist provided the flexibility he needed to serve as an athletic coach throughout the year, thus his narrative represents this flexibility in ways that are highly visible. Other narratives in this trope illustrate how they incorporated the flexibility of their work into varied changes or decisions they made, such as those participants who suspended their career to care for young children at home or changed jobs for different reasons. Lastly, Chapter Six: “Teaching and Collaborating” describes those narratives that focused primarily on teaching yet included much about work with colleagues. Erica’s narrative grounds the trope by describing instructional and collegial aspects of reading specialists’ work in elementary schools.

### **Researcher’s Perspective**

My perspective has been shaped by my own history, education, and experience. As a White middle class woman I understood, and perhaps took for granted, especially at first, many of the cultural understandings and presuppositions held by the majority of participants in this study. Their story is my story. My educational experience was similar to that of many individuals in this study, having also been raised and educated in the state where the study took place. I chose to study English education as an undergraduate and pursued a master’s degree in reading education, so my background was very similar to a number of participants in this study. My experience as a reading specialist in elementary schools in this state increased my affinity for

the stories told by participants and for the nuanced joys and frustrations they experienced in their own work.

I approached this research study aware of my own subjectivities based on my experiences and my beliefs about reading instruction and the work of reading specialists in elementary schools. My experiences as a reading specialist were varied and complex, including push-in and pull-out models of instruction, relationships with colleagues that ranged from impersonal but professional to friendly and highly collaborative. I served as a teacher leader, participated in multiple committees and curricular work groups, and had close contact with administration related to many facets of curriculum and instruction. My work included providing formative student literacy assessment and organizing formal student literacy assessment, scoring, and data reporting, as well as serving as a scorer during regional scoring events for statewide assessments. I served as a representative of the school district at the regional level and for several statewide events and conferences. My experiences were not unlike those reported in studies that looked at the work of reading specialists across the nation. As such, I had background knowledge and a certain lens through which I related with participants in this study, while, at the same time, I was somewhat removed from the field because of my full-time graduate studies and orientation as the researcher in this study.

Upon reflection, I saw both benefits and limitations to my own frame of reference. My familiarity with reading specialists' positions within a school afforded me a level of credibility with participants in this study. It may also have helped participants feel more comfortable sharing their perspectives with me because I had "walked in their shoes." At the same time, my own familiarity with reading specialists' work may have assumed understanding of their work in



ways that otherwise might have prompted me to ask for clarification of terms and/or events related through their narratives.

As a White, middle class, woman, I share characteristics of my race and class, and my gender, with many participants in this study. My race and class situate me in a space of privilege and power (Foucault, 1982), yet my gender groups me with the majority of elementary teachers and women whom society and the politics of education often marginalize (Mallozzi, 2011). In order to remain aware of these biases, and those I bring from my own work life as a reading specialist, I strove to remain in a questioning stance during interviews, focused on the narrator's story and allowing the narrator to take the lead by asking questions intended to encourage the participant to "Tell me more about that," or by remaining silent, waiting for the participant to fill the gap in conversation. After the interviews and during analysis, I made notes in the margins of interview transcripts as I read them and wrote more detailed memos during analysis of individual narratives, and when I read across narratives. These notes and memos aided me in "telling the participant's story" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Mischler, 1986; Reissman, 2008) by allowing me to collect my thoughts elsewhere, thus foregrounding the participant's words and their narratives in this paper.

The narratives shared in this paper may not be the narratives another researcher would have discovered in their conversations with or analysis of the data produced by these 22 individuals. My analysis and my decisions about what to include were shaped by my knowledge of the literature, the predominance of ideas in participants' narratives and across the narratives shared by multiple participants, and in ways not apparent to me despite my efforts to unearth and address them, according to my own world views. Others may find other important issues about reading specialists' narratives in these same data.

Twenty-two participants took part in semi-structured interviews. I coded the transcribed interview data to examine historical, institutional, and sociocultural forces as they shaped the work of these reading specialists and used gender studies and feminist perspectives to analyze how certain themes in the data related to dominant views in society regarding women teachers, especially those working in elementary schools. I worked to account for my own subjectivities as a researcher to reduce my influence on my report of participants' narratives in this study.

### **Conclusion**

Reading specialists have served in schools since the early 1900s to provide instruction for students experiencing reading difficulties and to support teachers and the schoolwide reading programs. Reading specialists in elementary schools enact multiple roles to serve the needs and expectations of students, colleagues, and administrators. Exactly how a reading specialist's roles are distributed depends upon administrative expectations, perceived academic needs, and the attributes of the reading specialist her/himself. These roles are equally informed by expectations for reading achievement that helped create a need for such professionals in schools. In the last fifteen years, federal and state policies and initiatives have led to significant changes in reading specialists' roles, thus their complex work narratives were selected as the focus for this study.

This qualitative interview study explored 22 elementary reading specialists' narratives to gain their perspectives about their work. Participants were elementary reading specialists working in New York State, recruited through recommendations and snowball sampling. One Black woman, one White man, and twenty White women composed the group of participants for this study. They ranged in age from 25 to 60, with 1 to 30 years of teaching experience. Participants possessed undergraduate degrees in various fields related to education, including psychology, music, English, and elementary education and master's degrees in reading or special

education. While many had classroom teaching experience, two participants entered the field as reading specialists directly from their graduate programs.

In keeping with recommendations for conducting inquiry into narrative, interviews provided data for this study. Inquiry into narrative views the participant as storyteller, thus interviews enabled me to gather participants' narratives and to capture their stories in their own words. My research question and the literature on reading specialists informed my interview questions. The first interview question asked: (1) Tell me about your work as reading specialists, (2) Tell me about your work with students, colleagues, and administrators, (3) Describe the characteristics of a "good" reading specialist. Subsequent interviews asked participants to tell me about the sociocultural aspects of their work, and about the political and historical forces that informed their work as reading specialists. Transcribed interviews were read in preparation for subsequent interviews so that clarifying questions and questions related to ideas participants shared in their narratives might be asked.

Interview transcript data were read using constant comparison and coded based on my research question and interview questions, to identify similarities, trends, and themes, as well as differences, and the range of responses within the data pool. Because this study employed inquiry into narrative as a method, maintaining the integrity of the narrative was important. To that end, individual narratives, and the collected narratives of each participant, were read recursively for themes; then all narratives were read for trends that reached across the range of participants' narratives. This process yielded three major themes, leadership, finding a niche, and teaching and collaborating that represented the ways reading specialists described their work in schools. The themes were used as categories, or tropes, to capture the types of roles enacted by participants as well as the ways they described their own experiences as reading specialists.

I approached this study with my own subjectivities as a White, middle class, educated woman teacher and reading specialist. I enacted identities that afforded me social capital and access to schools and to reading specialists' milieu. My privileged position, based on my Whiteness and experience as a teacher, benefitted me in the relative ease with which I gained access to participants and their narratives, because I was perceived as one of them. At the same time, my own view of the world from this same position limited my ability to see other perspectives that were not my own. As a researcher, I strove to see beyond my comfortable position, yet these attempts were constrained by my own lack of awareness of what I did and did not perceive. Thus, participants' narratives were read and analyzed through the lenses I brought to the analysis, including those that broadened my scope of awareness and those that limited it. As I wrote this paper, I worked to account for my own subjectivities. Foregrounding participant narratives as much as possible, and focusing on my research question and my knowledge of the literature, aided me in that accounting. The narratives shared in the next three chapters were the product of that work.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **FINDINGS: LEADERSHIP**

This chapter, and the two chapters that follow it, demonstrate that examining narratives of experience enables us to go beyond naming tasks and responsibilities to viewing the disparate historical, institutional, and societal contexts that shape the multifaceted narratives of reading specialists' work. The narratives these reading specialists related described the nuanced and sometimes subtle changes in reading specialists' work, necessitated by shifting demands and responsibilities to which these educators responded. These demands, oftentimes finite yet persistent in their frequency of occurrence, originating from multiple and varied sources, are not well reflected in the lists of reading specialists' roles found in previous research.

Leadership and the responsibilities attributed to authority emerged as a key theme for a subset of the participants in this study. Seven participants viewed leadership and authority as a critical aspect of their work such that it permeated their narratives. Their stories are represented in this chapter. These reading specialists filled leadership positions that were considered important to the personnel and the reading programs in the various schools and districts for which they worked. Most held explicit leadership responsibilities, reflected by a specific title, such as Emma's title of literacy coordinator, and acknowledged by administrators, classroom teachers, and the individual him/herself. Others took on less formalized yet important responsibilities in service to students, colleagues, or administrators. Within this trope, participant narratives reflected both formal, established responsibilities and expectations as well as those that were informal, conveying temporary or situational authority as needs arose. Their narratives have been arranged in this chapter to delineate the categories of descriptors they used to capture

the ways they enacted varied aspects of leadership, including, “Taking on Authority,” “One of the Teachers,” “Not ‘Just’ Teachers,” and “Mediators.”

Reading specialists in this trope served as leaders to support classroom teachers and the schoolwide reading program. The section, “Taking on Authority” described the formal or informal responsibilities these participants took on as part of their work. In “One of the Teachers,” participants identified themselves as teachers and aligned themselves with their classroom teacher colleagues. The section, “Not ‘Just’ Teachers,” described aspects of service, in addition to working with students and teachers, that set reading specialists apart from classroom teacher colleagues. In the section “Mediators,” participants described how they provided support for teacher colleagues as mentors, resources, and advisors.

Emma, a reading specialist and language arts coordinator in a large suburban district, was selected to represent those reading specialists whose narratives were dominated by leadership. Emma’s awareness and enactment of her leadership and its impact on personnel, instruction and the literacy program in the school formed a key image throughout her narrative. Thus, her narrative was selected to represent this trope.

Six women shared narratives similar to Emma’s, relating the ways leadership figured prominently in their work. All participants who invoked this trope provided professional development and instructional support for teachers. They varied greatly in their levels of interaction with students and the amount of direct instruction they provided. Cheryl’s leadership was formalized through her service as a teacher-on-special assignment in the rural district where she was employed as a reading specialist. She served in this capacity on a year-by-year basis, thus she knew that she might be expected to relinquish the formal leadership role and return to her former teaching responsibilities at the end of each year. Virginia and Katie served larger

urban districts as classroom teachers and reading specialists for many years before moving into more permanent professional development roles to support teachers providing direct instruction to students. Their narratives reflected a perceived importance linking their leadership to student success through its impact on teachers' pedagogy. Marie, Stephanie and Bridget served informally as leaders within their districts, providing instruction to students and professional development to their colleagues. All participants in this trope represented their buildings at district-level meetings, and met regularly with the building principal to discuss reading and language arts curriculum and instruction and any concerns that arose in these areas.

### **Taking on Authority**

Reading specialists serving in elementary schools identified themselves as classroom teachers, yet they were sometimes called upon to serve as leaders within their schools. Participants described the ways they were invited or encouraged to accept new responsibilities as leaders, including responsibility for curriculum, assessment, professional development, and generally supporting their colleagues and the instructional programs in their schools. For some, this was a formal leadership role with specific expectations while others were asked to contribute time and expertise to provide support in a less formal, as-needed collegial relationship with fellow educators.

Emma became the language arts coordinator in an elementary building serving a large suburban district with only two years' experience as a reading specialist. The assistant superintendent for curriculum "...must have seen something in me that she thought I could do this." Initially, Emma's responsibilities focused primarily on providing reading instruction, with the language arts coordinator duties filling approximately one-third of her time, yet the demands

shifted so that the coordinator responsibilities became a primary focus, leaving less time for her to work with students in her capacity as reading specialist.

A critical aspect of Emma's un-credentialed authoritative position included steering the language arts curriculum in the building as a guiding force among her peers and colleagues.

It's the larger kind of curriculum work vision that I'm moving them toward that, in a perfect world, it would be much better if it [grade level meeting] could be every week, but it's just not possible planning-wise, and thankfully I have a very experienced staff.

So they'll continue on with what we started, so it doesn't stop, which is a good thing...so they're farther along when we get back together.

Classroom teachers and other staff members met with Emma monthly in grade level teams to discuss curriculum, programs, assessment, and other language arts topics. While attendance was not mandatory, most, if not all, teachers attended these meetings regularly. "I can't require them to do that, but they see it as helpful to their planning, thankfully, and they're very good about that." These meetings provided opportunity to examine the language arts program and to address specific areas of concern, dependent upon the needs of the grade level team, the students, and the building as a whole.

Emma was able to manipulate her schedule in order to incorporate both the leadership and teaching aspects of her dual role by conflating the tasks, or by strategically selecting the classrooms and teachers with whom she worked. Scheduling changes were necessitated by changes in the student population and the needs of the building, altering the focus of Emma's responsibilities from reading teacher to language arts coordinator. She attributed her successful management, and her ability to weather changing responsibilities, to her knowledge and experience in the district.



I have found that the best way to kind of do both things at once—support new teachers and work with kids—is to be an AIS provider in the classroom. So then I'm there for five days a week. I'm there for the lesson part or, and/or I'll do the lesson part, and then stay to support the kids, and then that means that I meet with that teacher once a week. So that's the way I found to be most effective in covering all the bases, so to speak.

Emma supported new teachers by working with students in these classrooms and being available to the classroom teacher simultaneously. In this way, she could co-teach with the classroom teacher, work with small groups or individual students, and develop awareness of the teacher's instruction to provide the mentoring support that was a facet of her work as language arts coordinator.

Emma's twenty-one year career as a teacher and a leader enabled her to be well versed in both reading teacher and language arts coordinator expectations and responsibilities; thus, she had a broad understanding of the language arts and reading programs in the building.

I do love both [roles]. I love working with the children and I have two children who've gone to the school because I so support what we do here. But I also love the language arts piece and I feel like it really keeps me up to date.

Emma's position was one of leadership and instruction for most of her career. She knew the benefits of combining the language arts coordinator role with teaching in classrooms and working with students. For this reason, she experienced some concern regarding proposed changes, which would virtually eliminate the instructional aspects of her work. She explained the reasoning behind the potential change in this way, "...now they're considering having it [language arts coordinator] be a full-time position because of the testing responsibilities. It really consumes a lot of my time as a building person." She enjoyed both roles and found it

“...disappointing...that they’re considering splitting it and that isn’t something that I would especially advocate for...,” yet, she recognized the importance of the language arts/leadership component which continued to grow in its breadth of responsibility.

Emma served on multiple committees, including the Child Study Team (CST), building cabinet, faculty meetings, and a district-wide reading network in addition to the grade-level meetings that occurred each week. These groups met monthly; CST and the reading network meetings were full-day meetings while the building cabinet and faculty meetings occurred after students were released during a one-hour daily planning block for teachers. The frequency and variety of these responsibilities helped Emma remain “...more on top of things” in her role as language arts coordinator.

Marie and Bridget fulfilled informal leadership roles in their suburban districts, focused primarily on serving as resources to teachers and providing professional development in addition to their instructional responsibilities. Marie was familiar with pedagogy, philosophies, and cultures within the various buildings in the district, having worked in several of the district’s elementary buildings, while Bridget brought varied teaching experiences to her work in her building.

Marie was experienced enough to know she must carefully negotiate her work with teachers at times, in order to provide support for students in ways that would maximize all aspects of her work.

...my role, I see, is to model...to push-in and advocate more for those lower children but in a way so that I...so that the teacher still seeks me out, doesn’t say ‘Wow, back off. I don’t want to go there.’ So it’s been very different—it’s probably a lot more staff development than I ever anticipated, so that’s good.

Bridget oversaw the language arts program for the school and worked with teachers and students in classrooms. She worked with small groups of students and supervised four teaching assistants who worked with small groups, implementing the plans she created with the classroom teachers.

My current schedule is like this, three days a week I teach... those other two days I do different things. One thing is testing, and testing could be new entrants... and it could be testing for new referrals. I could be testing for annual reviews or it could be testing for school-based intervention team. I also sit on the district reading council, which is a group of all the reading teachers from every building... and also, for example, today, I was over at CSE (Committee on Special Education). I sometimes have to present a situation or a case over at CSE so that's pretty much the breadth of what I do.

Both Marie and Bridget served in leadership capacities, providing professional development for colleagues in their buildings and in individual classrooms. Each of them performed these aspects of their jobs, believing that their work with teachers would ultimately benefit students, especially those in greater need of academic support.

Stephanie, a reading specialist in a large suburban district, described an expectation to provide professional development in her own building and to be available to collaborate with other reading specialists around the district.

It's just part of our responsibility as reading specialists across the district, so we're not just there to service the students who need assistance but we're there to be a resource for the classroom teachers. We kind of go where the need is and we also give them what the higher-ups are telling us we need to do. If they hear something from the state or recognize an area that we need to focus on, they'll ask us to do that and we will. Three other participants in this trope, Cheryl, Virginia, and Katie, voiced similar understandings

of the ways their professional development responsibilities were perceived as well as the expectations that they be prepared to meet these needs at the building and district levels. As the literacy coordinator, Virginia was "...supposed to get guided reading up and running and train the teachers, work on their resources," while Cheryl's role as professional development/teacher on special assignment positioned her to "...work with teachers in a leadership capacity, help them be leaders." Virginia's work with teachers and curricular materials and Cheryl's work with teacher leaders illustrated the range of support provided by reading specialists serving as leaders in schools. The specific responsibilities and the content each individual provided as part of the professional development differed, yet this aspect of leadership was common to each of the participants in this trope. In addition to professional development responsibilities, reading specialists in this trope served on various committees and organizations, especially those committees that reviewed student progress and supported teachers as they implemented the reading and language arts curriculum.

Reading specialists serving as leaders within their individual schools and districts viewed that aspect of their work as a vehicle to support their colleagues within their classrooms and to provide direction for literacy instruction for grade level teachers and the faculty as a whole. At the same time, participants in this study saw themselves as part of the teaching faculty, with leadership responsibilities viewed as opportunities to serve their colleagues and the students within those classrooms.

### **One of the Teachers**

Another important part of this trope was insistence that reading specialists align with and be equated with classroom teachers, as a sign of shared confidence and trust. Reading

specialists' authority and credibility as leaders hinged, in part, on their ability to establish trust with classroom teachers and to gain their confidence. Sharing responsibility for instruction and student learning was an avenue reading specialists used to gain teachers' trust and confidence. Narratives in this section illustrate participants' work with students and teachers and the day-to-day routines grounding that work.

Emma's ability to build relationships with teachers was a vital part of her work in classrooms. She acknowledged "...it's very hard to work with teachers if they don't trust you and understand you and feel like you're there with them." Emma and the classroom teacher co-taught lessons and Emma targeted the students in need of support specifically, thus her credibility as a leader was grounded in her teaching and work with students. Her relationships with teachers, and the common experiences upon which those relationships were built, were the foundation she used to help them (teachers) "...to have a vision or ...understand what my vision is, based on the reading or the work I've done." Emma's work with students in classrooms facilitated her goal of developing trusting relationships with her colleagues, ultimately benefitting any language arts initiatives as a by-product of shared leadership.

Emma pushed into first grade classrooms daily to provide reading support to students and met once each week with the classroom teacher to provide ongoing professional development.

It's just put on the schedule and we don't even look at the kids [at the beginning of the year] until we get in there, it's just automatic because regardless of whether the class has five kids who need support or one, we figure all kids need support in beginning reading. Students in grades two through five received support four out of five days each week in a push-in or a pull-out situation, or in some cases a combination of both. Classroom teachers were "...comfortable with either having us in or not" to work with individual students or small groups

in the classroom or to take a small group to another room to provide reading support. Emma's visibility in classrooms reinforced confidence in her leadership because she had personal experience with students and with the literacy curriculum.

Stephanie's relationship with classroom teachers was an important aspect of her work with students. She taught fourth-grade for one year before transitioning to a reading specialist position in a large suburban district near a major city. She knew that her fourth-grade colleagues talked with other teachers

...and there was a lot of respect coming my way...they were aware of the fact that I knew what I was doing and I think I had established myself as a regular person with them and was one of them.

She worked with students in Kindergarten through fifth-grade to provide "...individualized reading and writing programs for all students qualifying for AIS (Academic Intervention Services)," in addition to collaborating with classroom teachers to ensure that the language arts program within the classrooms was successful for all students.

Marie worked with small groups of students in pull-out sessions at grades one, three, and five while she pushed into classrooms at grades two and four to support literature circles and writing. She felt confident about her ability to "...get kids started on the right foot and get them the experiences they need in reading." She focused her work with students, time spent in classrooms, and her work with teachers on the goal of giving students the literacy experiences they needed.

Like Emma, Bridget used her time for some direct instruction with students, yet she also supported classroom teachers through modeling guided reading or other instruction at the classroom teacher's request. As the sole reading specialist in the building, she was responsible

for overseeing language arts at all grade levels. Bridget planned her support based on her awareness of teachers' needs—"...do they need me to do some kind of lesson or do they just need me to do some kind of support." Four teaching assistants were deployed in classrooms to provide support for students when Bridget was not available. Bridget and the classroom teachers planned the lessons taught by the teaching assistants, thus Bridget remained current with student progress in each classroom directly or indirectly through her planning sessions with teachers.

Katie and Virginia worked with classroom teachers and reading specialists through the professional development they provided in and outside the classroom. Katie's early experiences as a reading specialist and subsequent work at a regional level enabled her to view aspects of reading instruction from a wider perspective. She saw a shift in teacher's attitudes toward students. Previously, Katie had perceived that classroom teachers thought that students struggling with reading difficulties were not the classroom teacher's "...problem...[they] belonged to the people [reading specialists/remedial reading teachers] who will take their kids during extra time or remedial or corrective or whatever the program was..." These teachers later exhibited a shift to shared responsibility between the classroom teacher and reading specialist for student learning. This change in attitude reinforced her belief that she and the classroom teachers were comparable in their work.

Virginia's work as a reading specialist, and her training in Reading Recovery made her "...a more effective reading teacher." She adapted the practices she used with Reading Recovery students and broadened their application to all students. As a professional developer, she taught these same strategies to classroom teachers because "...all teachers are reading teachers." Virginia modeled the strategies in classrooms with groups of students, and observed

classroom teachers implementing them. She saw herself as a peer with the classroom teachers during the give-and-take occurring in the cycles of modeling and feedback.

Members of this trope believed their work as teachers reinforced their credibility and their working relationships—as peers—with their colleagues. Reading specialists worked with students whose instructional needs exceeded general reading instruction in the classroom. Their work with struggling students supported classroom teachers' efforts, and in the best circumstances, aligned with classroom instruction. Whether reading instruction aligned or merely complemented classroom instruction, reading specialists and classroom teachers worked toward the goal of student achievement. Decisions regarding instructional settings, (e.g., pull-out or push-in) were often made during reading specialists' planning conversations with classroom teachers. This suggested that there were no hard and fast rules, but that student needs or teacher preference determined instructional settings. The relationships with teachers, and the accompanying sense of collegiality and collaboration, seemed to support these reading specialists in their work as teachers while it created a space for them to exercise their authority and enact their specific leadership roles.

### **Not Just Teachers**

Participants in this trope knew the value of being collegial with classroom teachers even as they realized that their leadership roles sometimes required that they take a more administrative stance. Emma and the principal had agreed that one of Emma's primary goals was mentoring new teachers until they received tenure. She achieved this through "pushing into," that is, co-planning and co-teaching with these teachers in their classrooms, modeling ways of working with students to provide support for the new teachers. "So I double-dip essentially, but it allows me to be in that classroom every day. I meet and plan weekly with them



for an hour.” During years when there were few new teachers, Emma opened up the opportunity for classroom collaboration to all teachers who are “...interested and I’ll either do a Unit of Study with them or I’ll work all year long, it really is quite flexible.” Emma’s narrative illustrated the ways she negotiated her roles as reading teacher and language arts coordinator and the leadership aspects that accompanied those roles. She described other responsibilities and expectations linked with both the reading teacher and language arts coordinator aspects of her work and that of her colleagues.

Emma facilitated monthly grade-level meetings at which teachers gathered to plan and collaborate. “It’s not mandatory, but everyone comes.” Together, Emma and the teachers planned units, participated in book studies or other collaborative efforts based on teachers’ needs and interests. Emma solicited recommendations from classroom teachers regarding goals for the language arts program, then she integrated the goals she had established as the language arts coordinator with those of the classroom teachers to develop program goals that were important to the faculty as a whole.

Emma described the teaching, leadership, and supervisory aspects of her work, I do still teach reading classes, but the majority of my time is spent with language arts coordinator responsibilities. I have two full-time reading teachers and three full-time teaching assistants in the room so there’s a lot of staffing and I’m responsible for all of that. Myself, I teach about five or six classes depending on the year.

She met with the special education teachers each month to discuss student progress, needs, and testing modifications and scheduled all Academic Intervention Services (AIS) classes. She was responsible for setting the reading schedules, assigning “...who works with whom—the aides are all connected to a reading teacher for each class—so although they teach nine classes...they are

assigned to a reading key teacher for those nine classes.” Each reading specialist supervised the work of the reading assistant, collaborated with them to plan instructional support, and worked closely with them regarding students’ needs. Emma managed the components of the language arts program, including scheduling personnel, thus her work entailed more responsibility than was asked of many classroom teachers or reading specialists.

The notion that leadership responsibilities marked these reading specialists as “more than teachers” was also reflected in Stephanie’s narrative.

We’re [reading specialists] in a sticky situation—we’re in between—we’re not administration but we’re not classroom teachers, so we’re not necessarily a part of the group but we’re not outside of the group like the principal would be either.

As a reading specialist, working in collaboration with others was “...more challenging...you need to be very diplomatic.” Stephanie understood the nuances of sometime-inclusion – sometime-fringe status and was able to negotiate her place in that somewhat undefined or ambiguous space. She knew the importance of teacher colleagues perceiving her as “...one of them and not flaunting the fact that you really have more of an administrative role and work very closely with the principal, so it’s very delicate.” The need for, or awareness of that “delicate balance” was mentioned several times during Stephanie’s narrative; indeed, her story describes a building where a hierarchy of reading specialists and classroom teachers existed that was not present in the narratives of other participants.

Katie worked with teachers in multiple districts to provide professional development and resource support for teachers. While she did not work directly with students, she referred to herself as a reading specialist because her work revolved around reading and supporting students just as it had when she was a district reading specialist. Her narrative described the pressure and

responsibility she felt to diagnose reading difficulties and repair or remediate them. Reading specialists were tasked with goals beyond the expectations placed upon classroom teachers because reading specialists

...aren't in that classroom and aren't with those kids 24 hours a day, or even the 50 some hours or 40 hours they get a week of school time, but it's your job to see the need and try to fill it and try to meet it. And it's been very frustrating because those kids have to be successful when you're not with them.

She believed that reading specialists sometimes felt as though administrators and classroom teachers called upon them to "fix" students experiencing reading difficulties, alleviating others of the responsibility.

Virginia spent many hours working with classroom teachers, modeling lessons and providing support for reading instruction. Prior to working with the teachers, Virginia met with building principals to plan "teacher collaboration meetings" thus engaging administrators in the decision-making aspect of planning professional development in their buildings. Virginia talked with principals

...about their scores, and that...[went] right into 'Well, let's get some kids in here and let's see what's really happening and maybe I can help you to puzzle out what the problem is.' And so, in come the children, and I would just teach them what I wanted teachers to learn.

Virginia modeled lessons with students to plant the seeds for future professional development in principals' minds. In this way, she finessed approval for the types of professional development she believed were necessary for student achievement in literacy. In addition to delivering the

professional development workshops, she spent time in classrooms, modeling and observing lessons, or working with students and teachers.

As a district-level employee, Virginia was available as a resource to teachers and administrators. She believed that her experience with teachers and students at the various elementary schools in the district increased her credibility with classroom teachers and strengthened the effectiveness of the professional development she provided. She perceived herself as a reading specialist and a teacher yet her responsibilities extended beyond a single classroom to encompass the district.

Marie participated in several learning opportunities throughout her career, including Reading Recovery training. She helped the district's literacy director run the reading clinic at the local state university campus for several years, subsequently taking full responsibility for the clinic when the literacy director left the district. As a result of her connection with the university, Marie taught one or two undergraduate level classes in addition to the reading clinic. Through these opportunities, she remained active in the field and current with her knowledge of literacy pedagogy, enhancing her leadership potential for her district.

Through her work in the reading clinic, Marie met a cohort of potential reading specialists each year, made up of mostly female students. Her experiences as an educator and an instructor taught her that a small number of men served in elementary teaching positions and those who did usually moved on to work as administrators.

I just think they [men] are such wonderful role models for the boys who are trying to...who are just not finding an interest in literacy. And it's rare that you see them...they usually end up being selected for classrooms because I think that's where administrators want them to be and encourage them to be...the one male reading specialist that we had

for a number of years went on to administration because I think that's where they think they need to go—that it's expected.

Marie's view of the gendered expectations for men at the elementary level was not an uncommon view although other participants did not always explore it to the same depth as Marie. She identified ways that males in elementary teaching roles could make a difference and the likelihood that they will move from teaching to administration.

Marie's impression of male teachers' career track was common among participants, indeed those who commented about male teachers at the elementary level believed that most men serving as classroom teachers would eventually leave the classroom to serve as administrators, yet Marie questioned the reasons why so few men worked as reading specialists.

...maybe it goes to the perception for many people that it's like a babysitting job, I don't know, and that women are better at doing that than men. I don't know, I can't understand it—I don't know if they think they won't be fulfilled there and so they don't go there or if they're...I know—well I think they'd be snapped up in a heartbeat if they'd apply for certain positions at the elementary level. I know in our district they'd be snapped up.

Marie, and other participants, spoke of the expectations for improving students' reading ability, and responsibilities to serve teacher colleagues as mentors, leaders, and curriculum coordinators. Such responsibilities for leadership positioned these participants in the realm of classroom teachers and the realm inhabited by building leaders.

Participants in this trope as well as others in this study were highly involved in committee and school-based groups, both instructional and extra-curricular. Those reading specialists serving in school settings attended a version of a child study team (CST) or Instructional Support Team (IST) to collaborate with colleagues in devising and implementing academic and social

supports for students at risk. Many of the participants were responsible for assessment of students at various times of the year; they analyzed data, kept records, and met with teachers and administrators to discuss student performance and develop instructional and/or intervention plans based on the data.

Cheryl reflected on various meetings and committee memberships that were part of her responsibility as a school-based reading specialist.

...oh my goodness, there are meetings about literacy programs, there's meetings about school improvement, there's meetings for RTI (Response to Intervention), there's, you know, you might be on the social committee, the school health and safety committee. In the building I was in, the reading teachers were always involved in lots and lots and lots of things, so, you know, then there's a meeting.

Cheryl, and other reading specialists who shared similar examples of co-curricular responsibilities in their individual schools were able to interact with colleagues and build relationships outside the classroom. Committee membership was not always mandatory yet participation helped reading specialists develop bonds with colleagues through shared service to the school and the community. At the same time, their service was an aspect of their leadership, further differentiating them from most of their teacher colleagues and creating an ambiguity in their position in the school requiring a "delicate balance" of leadership and collegiality.

These narratives reflected nuances of reading specialists' roles as teachers and leaders. Reading specialists and classroom teachers served together on some committees, yet reading specialists had more responsibility in many committees, often serving as facilitators or providing committee leadership. Participants in this trope spent a considerable amount of their time in

committee meetings and other out-of-classroom activities, thus precluding them from some of the instructional aspects of their roles.

### **Mediators**

Participants also spoke of the need to serve as an intermediary in various ways, in some instances as a facilitator and in others as a negotiator between classroom teachers and administrators, thus further requiring the delicate balance of roles. They sought collegial, collaborative relationships and worked to build them through their work as leaders, their work with students, and as teaching partners in the classroom.

Emma served as a mediator with colleagues and parents. She described her relationship with teachers as collegial and collaborative, built on trust developed over the course of time. “I hope they see me as a colleague and a resource.” Emma’s hope was that she and the teachers could collaborate and “...roll up their sleeves and put [their] heads together to figure things out.” She sought out their views regarding the school’s direction, knowing that they respected her 22-years in the district and her ability to make some of the decisions independently. Emma believed that the teachers saw her as a learner, not as one who had all the answers but was still engaging in personal staff development. “Because I’ve been here 20 years, most of the staff is just very comfortable with that. It’s not a supervisory position. It’s not an administrative position, no judgment or anything like that, so it’s really quite collaborative.” At the same time, she held her own goals for creating a shared K-5 vision and set of expectations for the building. These goals were formed during conversations between Emma and the building principal, then, Emma shared them with the classroom teachers during the weekly and monthly meetings.

A small population of parents was campaigning for a return to using a basal series for instruction, yet teachers, and the majority of parents were satisfied with the workshop structure and the current language arts program. The tensions around this issue created...

...[a] sense that there's a better way to do things and I think some of it comes down to trust. What it's done for us is really gotten us to be much more articulate and more able to put things down on paper and having plans...so every grade level now has a very clear, written, reading and writing plan along with word study that's public because there are no secrets, and there's nothing that we're teaching that people think we're not, it just may look different.

In her leadership role, Emma facilitated the work to create a written, articulated scope and sequence of the buildings' language arts program. The scope and sequence, and Emma's deliberate attempts to respond to parental concerns, were designed to eliminate any possible misunderstandings or suspicions on the part of community members who questioned the pedagogy enacted in the building.

Marie willingly received her colleagues' requests for support and acknowledged that they looked to her to serve as a mediator between them and the administrators at times. For example, teachers went to Marie, rather than the principal, for permission to miss planning meetings knowing that their absence would not be challenged because "Marie said it was okay." While she knew the teachers should be talking directly with the principal about an absence, Marie accepted this responsibility at times because she thought it would keep open the doors of communication between reading specialists and classroom teachers and make future interactions more likely to be on a positive note.



Bridget acknowledged the need for awareness of teachers' sensitivity as a reading specialist, "...when you're dealing with veteran staff, you have to be highly respectful and very careful how you go in...so it's a process, it's always a process." In this way, Bridget negotiated her work with teachers, hoping her mediation might soften potential resistance to any suggestions that teachers consider new ideas or suggestions about materials or pedagogy. She worked to maintain the relationships she had established with these veteran teachers as she attempted to make measured gains towards instructional changes she and the administrators thought were necessary.

Bridget's responsibilities included scheduling her time and that of the four reading TAs. Some tensions arose that required her attention and some alteration in schedules.

...I became the buffer zone for them, that if they had a concern about working with a specific teacher, or if a teacher had a concern about working with a specific TA, they could go through me and no feelings got hurt. I could simply schedule it, and nothing need be said.

Bridget gained insight into personnel and managed assignments based on those insights. She appreciated the TAs' work, knowing that she was unable to reach all students without them. She worked to "...make us a department" and saw scheduling as a means toward that end.

Stephanie personally encountered an open, collegial reception when she moved from the classroom to work as a reading specialist, yet professionally, the staff challenged and questioned new initiatives, meeting them with debate and resistance. Stephanie appreciated their stance toward top-down leadership and preferred that they question initiatives rather than "...walk around like little robots and do whatever anyone wants them to do." She saw her position as that of a facilitator or negotiator and acknowledged "...it's all about being delicate...going with the

flow... until they realized they can trust you not to try to change their instruction but work with them, not against them.” The trust built between Stephanie and these teachers opened the lines of communication and allowed for a productive exchange of ideas.

Acting as mediators with colleagues and administrators was claimed as a role by all participants who drew primarily on this trope, yet they all performed some type of negotiation or acted as a buffer each day at work. A key aspect of this negotiation or mediation seemed to be “delicacy” or “‘awareness’ of the sensitivities of others.” Negotiation or mediation, as reflected in these narratives, enabled these participants to build trust and rapport with colleagues, so valued by participants in this trope, as it also apparently met the needs of their classroom teacher colleagues, at least as they narrated the experience.

## **Conclusion**

Participants’ histories shaped their choices to pursue their educational paths and to enter the educational field. Their experiences informed their decisions to pursue master’s degrees in reading/literacy and to take on the work of reading specialists. Participant narratives reflected enactment of the roles attributed to reading specialists throughout the history of the position, especially the roles of instruction, assessment, and leadership. Serving as a resource to teachers was often subsumed under their leadership role.

Participants’ leadership and authority narratives illustrated the ways they took responsibility for literacy programs, curriculum, scheduling, teaching, and collaboration with colleagues as facets of their day-to-day work. Some roles were formalized with specific titles such as language arts coordinator or teacher-on-special-assignment for professional development, while other roles were informal, even situational or temporary in nature.

Participants in this study described themselves as teachers and aligned themselves with classroom teachers. Reading specialist positions and classroom teaching positions differ in the ways they are operationalized within a school, yet they are contractually the same for salary and performance expectations. Participants collaborated with and supported classroom teachers as they provided instruction for students, mentored teachers, and shared decision-making responsibilities for the reading program. At the same time, reading specialists' roles required flexibility to meet the demands of committee meetings, school or district responsibilities, and leadership in its many forms.

Participants worked to develop trusting, collegial relationships with classroom teachers through their own teaching and through their collaboration in the classroom with other teachers. They also built trust through their leadership, serving as coordinators or facilitators in many committees and, informally, in their mediation or negotiation. Duration or level of authority notwithstanding, participants valued their leadership positions and the inherent authority for the prestige it bestowed, particularly as it enabled them to make decisions they believed would ultimately benefit the students and the school or district as a whole. One reading specialist in this trope voiced concern about the lack of male teachers at the elementary level. Her comments also reflected awareness that women were perceived as nurturers, thus appropriate in teaching roles, while male teachers should aspire to administrative roles. Other narratives described caring and concern for their students' overall well-being, as well as their reading achievement—without linking this concern directly to any discussion of gender or women as nurturers. Participants' roles and their identities as reading specialists were shaped by educational policies and initiatives and by social expectations that normalized White females in elementary educational settings. Participant narratives displayed a tendency to conform to political and

cultural hegemonic norms, rather than to challenge, question, or even acknowledge the ways their roles and identities were bound by these norms.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### FINDINGS: FINDING A NICHE

“Finding a niche” describes those participants whose narratives focused largely on the ways they used periods of change relative to work situation, family, or personal choice to create a harmonious work experience or situation. More specifically, several participants shifted teaching roles from classroom or content area teaching to work as a reading specialist while two entered the education field from other occupations. Some took time from work to care for children and re-entered the field in new roles, and one participant sought a dual role as teacher and athletic coach. Narratives in this trope reflected participants’ ways of flexibly negotiating their in- and out-of-work lives. Their struggles to achieve this manage work and personal responsibilities through a mixture of overt action and a “wait and see” attitude illustrated participants’ desire to find a niche, or a work situation that afforded them space and time to fulfill personal and other professional needs in a way that was complementary to the needs of their work as educators. Participant narratives in this trope have been arranged within these categories, “Settling Into the Job,” “Advocate For Students,” “Demanding But Manageable,” “Job In/Security,” and “Job Flexibility.”

Participants in this trope described how flexibility within their jobs as reading specialists enabled them to meet the demands of their work- and out-of-work-lives. “Settling Into the Job” described how participants transitioned from their first days as reading specialists to acquire more seasoned status. The section, “Advocate For Students,” related narratives of participants’ commitment to help students achieve greater academic success and increased self-confidence and self-efficacy. In the section, “Demanding But Manageable,” participants described some of the tensions related to record-keeping and to collegial expectations that they encountered. “Job

In/Security” described how participants anticipated their continued employment from year to year. The section “Job Flexibility” described how participants extended their work as reading specialists into various extracurricular educational opportunities.

Paul’s narrative was chosen to represent this trope because it overtly illustrated the ways he negotiated his personal, educational, and career choices to realize his desire to teach and to serve as an athletic coach. Coaching students involved in sports energized his work as a reading specialist and he incorporated what he knew about students in the classroom into his athletic coaching, with the belief that his performance in both situations was thereby improved.

Six additional narratives provided examples of the ways participants in this study negotiated various aspects of their work- and personal-lives to find their niche. Most of these reading specialists worked daily with students, except Anna, whose professional development responsibilities placed her primarily with teachers. Anna found her niche in professional development after varied teaching experiences and multiple moves around the country. Deb and Nancy were veteran teachers and reading specialists working in rural school districts. They found their respective niches after taking time from work to stay at home with children, each taking a reading specialist position for the first time upon their return to work. Peggy settled into her niche as a new reading specialist after raising her young children and after a short interval as a classroom teacher in a small private school. Like Peggy, Julie and Monica were relatively new to their work as reading specialists. Julie began her work as a reading specialist shortly after completing her graduate program. She had no prior teaching experience. Monica served as a special education teacher for almost a decade before incorporating the reading role. Julie had no experience to call upon as she settled into her new position while Monica’s niche was somewhat

familiar because of her previous work as a special education teacher. She looked forward to teaching reading and was motivated to meet the needs of the students and the district she served.

### **Settling Into the Job**

This section describes the ways participants settled into their position as reading specialists and established themselves within that work. Participants who had previously served as classroom teachers, as well as those who had pursued careers outside education, sought to clarify and define their understanding of the position and their identity as reading specialists.

Paul worked in the same small, rural district that he had attended for most of his primary and secondary education. Previously, he had served as a classroom teacher in a charter school in a larger urban area before moving to a rural district where he spent three years as a reading specialist working with students in Kindergarten through second grade. Paul decided to make one more move and return to his “home” district as a reading specialist to shorten his commute and return to familiar surroundings.

Paul’s classes included an ELA class, computer classes, and reading intervention classes. As a first-year teacher in the school, he taught the classes he was assigned.

...myself, I have sixth grade AIS [Academic Intervention Services] and fifth grade AIS.

Next year, I think I’ll be more...and I also have computers...but next year, I’m going to

lose that computer duty, I believe, and do four, five, six AIS reading.

In addition to his AIS classes and computer lab responsibilities, Paul worked as part of the sixth-grade ELA team teaching English/Language Arts to a small group of sixth graders. “It’s almost a two hour block, which is nice. So it gives you time to allow them [the students] to work on things and then...see where they’re at and get back to them if they need more.” Paul and his sixth-grade colleagues divided the 80 sixth-grade students into groups. His group consisted of

15 students for whom reading comprehension was a source of difficulty; therefore, it was determined that they would benefit from working with a reading specialist as their primary ELA teacher.

Paul enjoyed teaching small groups of students and believed it benefitted them. He contrasted the current work with small groups to his previous experience teaching larger math and science classes. His ELA class of 15 students was a relatively small group, in comparison to those previous experiences.

The small group is what I really like. I like it a lot better than the classroom and the 40 minutes a day that you get with each group, you know, to...being able to work in that small group. You develop close relationships, possibly...you know, I enjoy that too. He liked working with small groups of students because he was able to individualize instruction and develop relationships with each student. Although there were no statistics available to support his opinion, Paul believed that the AIS work and the slower pace for ELA class were reaping rewards for his students and that AIS was a significant force in helping students achieve.

Deb worked in a small rural school district with one classroom per grade level. Initially, she was responsible for the entire Kindergarten through twelfth grade reading intervention program, which she implemented with the help of a teaching assistant assigned to the reading program.

...and they [the administrators] realized it was too much so they split the position to a half-time—I was full-time from grades four through twelve—and there was someone kindergarten through three who was doing part-time reading/part-time math.

A few years later, another shift occurred, moving Deb to the elementary level where she worked with students in kindergarten through grade six.



Nancy was a veteran teacher working in a large rural district as one of four reading specialists in a K-6 building. She taught in both co-teaching and pull-out situations, thus she believed she had some insight into the ways classroom teachers perceived the reading specialists in the building.

I think they look at reading specialists as different. And they've realized we've had different training than they've had and we've had more education in teaching reading than they've had, and so I think they kind of look at us a little bit differently now and I think they treat us differently too. I've had a lot of teachers who always say 'What do you think we should do?' Whereas before it was, 'I want you to do this.'

Opportunities to work with students and teachers in the classroom provided space for classroom teachers and reading specialists to get to know each other's teaching styles, strengths, and weaknesses. When reading specialists supported students in classrooms, teachers were more likely to be curious about reading specialists' work, leading to more collegial relationships.

I think the teachers...I think they respect us. I think sometimes they think we get in the way, that they have too many people in their classrooms. They don't want someone else in there, especially the upper levels. I think the lower levels really like us; they feel that they really need the help...

Nancy recognized the need to work with each classroom teacher on an individual basis, to respect the differences in their styles, and to respect their specific preferences. She found that early elementary teachers were more likely to welcome colleagues into their classrooms than upper-elementary classroom teachers and she accommodated those preferences accordingly. Thus, Nancy established a collaborative type of niche or routine with some push-in support. She

accommodated the preferences of colleagues at the intermediate level by pulling out their students for reading instruction.

Anna worked as a literacy specialist for grades 4 and 5. This position lasted for only six months as Anna and her family moved to the northeast where she took a position as a fifth grade classroom teacher and completed the requirements for certification as a reading specialist. Another move to a neighboring state resulted in a professional development position drawing on Anna's experience and knowledge in reading. "I was hired as a teacher trainer for school improvement. We do professional development and work with teachers." Anna worked with teachers to provide support and professional development in literacy. She worked with students, especially with small groups of students to model instruction.

Julie, a recent graduate and a new teacher, lacked classroom experience yet she was well versed in current pedagogy. Julie had little knowledge of her new school's routines or its culture, yet she functioned as a resource to classroom teachers. "I was pretty overwhelmed at first," she shared. "I did talk to [a colleague]; I emailed [Professor \_\_\_\_\_] a few times. She helped. I'm pretty good at...figuring out what I'm supposed to do..."

After Julie's first year as a reading specialist, she relocated to a rural area in the same state and began working as a reading specialist in a new school. She worked with students in Kindergarten through fourth grade each morning, then traveled to the upper elementary school to work with students in grades five and six. Working in two buildings brought its own set of challenges, in that Julie had to schedule meetings with teachers or administrators strategically and needed to establish relationships with staff members in each building. Her narrative of her schedule is reflected in chart form (See Appendix, Table 2).

Julie sometimes found it challenging to manage the responsibility of serving two buildings, despite having time to meet with teachers as part of her schedule. “As far as teacher interaction, it’s less interaction with the teachers just because I am between two buildings, so I’m very busy. When I get there in the morning, I hit the ground running.” The times she had available did not always correspond with teachers’ availability and she preferred to coordinate with teachers in person. She kept materials in two buildings, thus she experienced a few pragmatic challenges as well. Julie settled in a routine that accommodated the demands of both buildings by arriving earlier than required to prepare materials for the day and meet with classroom teachers and by staying late most days to be available to teachers at her afternoon site.

Monica, a former special education teacher, and Peggy, whose previous work was in banking, were both in the early years of their careers as reading specialists. Monica incorporated her special education knowledge to support a student with high academic needs.

I’m actually working with a student right now who is non-verbal and he has no use of his extremities so he communicates through a dynabox. It’s very difficult for me to understand if he is truly reading and what level he’s reading at because nothing, there’s no decoding—verbal decoding. So it’s all based on comprehension and really, you know, question and answer.

Monica also provided instruction for students who were at-risk for reading difficulties. She felt “very frustrated” because she did not meet with them regularly. Peggy was responsible for providing push-in reading support in classrooms as well as pull-out instruction for students in Kindergarten through sixth grade. Her work included significant time spent in the classroom to support the classroom teacher and provide support for students at all levels of reading ability. “My role in each classroom, and with each teacher is different. And that’s the piece I really like.

There's not one dictated role that I need to follow...it's...we truly create it every year." Peggy's interactions with students and collaborative planning with classroom teachers helped her design her program from year-to-year. She enjoyed that flexibility in her work.

### **Advocate for Students**

This section illustrates the ways reading specialists in this trope perceived responsibility for particular students' academic and personal well-being. Reading specialists' narratives described opportunities to develop relationships with students based on trust and caring, being keenly aware of the needs students brought to school and feeling a need to help meet those individual needs. Academic responsibilities included the need to advocate with classroom teachers, administrators, and sometimes parents to provide support and encouragement for students' learning and access to reading material. Participants who spoke of these perceived responsibilities believed that they were afforded opportunities to care for particular students in ways that other adults in the school might not, based on number of students and/or the amount of time spent with students individually or in small groups.

Paul's students were placed with him to provide increased individualization of instruction by moving at a slower pace than the other ELA classes.

We all use the basal; at this point in the year I'm probably a half a unit behind—a half a theme behind. The high group is on the next theme, we're just one story away from finishing up...I go about two weeks with every story...and they [the other classes] get a story done a week. At a slow pace you can really get involved and take your time, you know, which helps out. You're not rushed.

In addition to the basal, Paul incorporated a few trade books into the curriculum for his ELA class. He thought it provided a good opportunity to incorporate instruction and practice with

vocabulary, spelling, and comprehension as they read the trade book “to prepare them for what they get in seventh grade.”

Paul served on the school-based Child Study Team (CST) meeting regularly with colleagues to discuss students’ academic and social strengths and areas of need and to determine the best methods for meeting those individual needs. Similarly, he attended referral meetings for his students who were under consideration for special education services where he would share information about a student’s strengths and areas of need as the committee considered the best educational plan for the student. Paul was willing to serve on various committees and to represent the district during regional scoring events, yet he did not perceive himself as a professional development provider. “The new guy on the block doesn’t need to be telling older, veteran teachers what to do.” He was comfortable having informal discussions with colleagues and participating in meetings but did not provide any formalized professional development.

Building relationships with students was a recurring theme in Paul’s narrative, reflecting an optimistic perspective toward his work and his own impressions of his students. He maintained a focus on the positive aspects of his work, yet he was realistic about the challenges he faced, acknowledging “...if a kid bothers you enough, he’s gone in 40 minutes, so it’s not that big of a deal.” Paul’s ability to see the positive was aided by his refusal to view any challenging student behavior as anything but a temporary situation. This ability may have been derivative of his gender and a perception of assumed authority as a White male.

Paul believed he served as a role model for “...quite a few kids [who] don’t have that male role model at home.” His “laid-back personality” enabled him to believe he was able to motivate students to care about learning. At the same time, his easy-going style was a potential disadvantage when students responded to his “...laid-back personality...[and would] try to push

the buttons a little bit too—maybe a little bit more.” Paul acknowledged the ways that students sometimes sought to manipulate a situation to deflect attention from their difficulty with a task, cognizant that students with learning issues could use misbehavior to avoid disclosure of any difficulties they might experience.

Some of my friends, there’s no way they could do what I do. You need to be patient.

Patience, that’s definitely key. You’re working with the kids that don’t get things right away...patience and repetition. You repeat yourself a lot. And you tend, with those kids you tend to deal with misbehavior too [...] because anything to distract you from realizing that they don’t understand something they tend to do.

Understanding the ways students could mask or hide their deficits and the need for patience on his part, Paul’s attention to areas of difficulty and concern for his students’ well-being were key aspects of his work. The small group setting, slower pacing and repetitive nature of the work, which others might find untenable, provided opportunities to help make spaces and situations for students to learn and achieve.

AIS classes provided support for students who didn’t qualify for special education services but needed more support than students who succeeded in a general education setting. Paul thought of AIS as

‘...a tweener,’ you know, it’s for kids that struggle a little bit but aren’t necessarily a special ed. student, you know what I mean...and just need that time aside to work in a small group and get individualized instruction based on their needs.

As the AIS teacher, Paul considered his position as a “tweener” position in that he taught neither general education classes nor special education but provided support that fell somewhere in the middle. He believed that an effective reading specialist would ultimately work oneself out of a

job: "...a reading specialist is the only person who tries to get rid of their job. Am I right? Trying to get kids better at reading and if you're 100% successful, you don't have a job."

Nancy believed reading specialists had more opportunity to make personal connections with students and to advocate for students in ways that classroom teachers with larger numbers of students could not. She reflected on the numbers of students who came to school hungry and tired. "I think you should be nurturing with them. I expect them to behave...but I think you can get a lot farther by treating them nicely than you do by criticizing them or demeaning them..." Her knowledge of these students helped her provide for some of their material or emotional needs while she helped them improve their reading achievement.

Peggy's work included collaborative teaching in classrooms where she co-taught lessons and provided reading support for students at all levels of achievement. She worked with students who were experiencing some level of reading difficulty and she provided support for accelerating students whose reading progress showed a readiness to move more rapidly than peers in the classroom. As a school, Peggy and her colleagues had "...enhanced our program and added many features and more is happening within the classroom for reading and writing instruction." The time she spent in classrooms and working with individual students enabled her to get to know many students, thus she was able to make recommendations and suggestions for support or extension, based on student needs and development.

Anna, Julie, and Deb advocated for students through their work with students and teachers, and through their attention to using data to provide information to support teachers' instructional decisions and their own decisions about student progress and instructional needs. These aspects of their knowledge of students were applied to their own instruction, collaboration with teachers, committee work, and meetings specifically attending to students' progress such as

Child Study Team (CST) or Instructional Support Team (IST) meetings. Deb described the process of deepening classroom teachers' understanding of Response to Intervention (RTI).

I had a discussion with someone at one of these [RTI planning] meetings. I had a discussion and she just couldn't get when does the CSE referral come in. She said, 'Well, when is the CSE referral made?' and I said, 'Perhaps never.' She said, 'What do you mean?' and I said, 'Well, if a child is making progress at that intervention, from what I understand RTI to be, then that's an appropriate intervention and that continues.'

As Deb detailed the process with her colleague, she provided support and a little professional development. At the same time, she supported students as she smoothed misunderstandings about the process for instructional supports for students with reading difficulties.

Reading specialists whose narratives fit this trope as well as the remaining participants in this study strove to gain insight and understanding into the academic lives and, within reason, into the personal lives of their students to better enable themselves to provide the types of support they perceived these students might need. A few, like Nancy, were keenly aware of perceived personal, social and emotional needs which they attempted to address and to convey to their colleagues, especially classroom teachers working directly with the individual students. Other participants were less vocal about any perceptions of student socio-emotional needs or situations. In general, participants believed their knowledge of their students enabled them to better serve those students. They incorporated varied aspects of this knowledge into their day-to-day involvement with students.

### **Demanding But Manageable Work**

Participants found the demands of the reading specialist position to be surprisingly great, yet they perceived the demands to be more manageable than the demands placed upon classroom



teachers, in general. Some former elementary classroom teachers like Nancy, who spoke most adamantly about the different roles, acknowledged that she preferred to continue as a reading specialist than return to the classroom.

Many participants shared the notion that, given a choice, they would continue on as reading specialists rather than return to the classroom. For example, Paul was hopeful but pragmatic about his future as a reading specialist, “Other than being a reading teacher, I don’t see myself doing anything different except going into the classroom to keep a job. Other than that, I don’t see myself changing all that much.” Collectively, participant narratives reflected feelings of efficacy and comfort with the position and the responsibilities that enabled them to feel valued and necessary in their work.

The reporting and record-keeping responsibilities linked to the reading specialist position were substantial, sufficient to be considered a “pitfall” of the job. “The paperwork’s horrendous. That’s one of the downfalls of the position, as well as all the upkeep on the folders.” Student folders contained letters stating that a student was receiving AIS support, contact logs in which Paul noted daily work with the student, as well as communications with classroom teachers and parents, work samples, assessments, and progress reports for 35 students. The task of updating and maintaining the folders usually required time outside the school day for completion. Paul’s schedule included a full teaching load with little time to dedicate to paperwork, thus he completed many of these tasks before or after school.

Paul contrasted the record keeping required of reading specialists in his district to the classroom teachers’ responsibilities that included “attendance, lunch count, making sure kids are ready to go home...and all those little extra responsibilities that come along with being a classroom teacher” in addition to grading and report cards. He added, speaking of the work of

reading specialists, "...we have our stresses but I think there's more, there tends to be more stress with classroom teacher work because, I mean, it's nonstop."

Testing was viewed as a source of stress for students and teachers, especially the state assessments administered to students in grades 3-8 each Spring. Paul's concern stemmed from the perceived need to prepare students for the assessment, a task that took valuable time from individualized, targeted instruction focused on addressing students' needs for reading support.

...just the requirements on each child, the ELA testing that they have every year. That's a lot of stress to put on kids. And to be honest with you, as an AIS teacher...I started prepping these kids for the test—that's six weeks not working on their individual needs, working on how to take this test so they can do well on it.

Paul was not a classroom teacher, yet student results were of concern to him as they were a component of the data used to make determinations about participation in AIS, thus directly affecting students' progress and Paul's own sense of efficacy in his work.

Deb used assessment results to make decisions about student groups and to make decisions about the method of service delivery as she met with each classroom teacher before beginning the year's reading services to discuss student needs.

We met in the beginning, I said, 'How do you want to work this? Do you want me to push-in or pull-out?' Both teachers, third and fourth, and fifth, have said they would rather I pulled out. That's personalities; that's okay. I tried pushing in with a fifth grade teacher a few years ago and it just didn't work out—not personality-wise—she just was not comfortable. I'm not one to sit in the background and kind of watch. I want to jump in and chime in. She kind of took it as I was overriding—she thought she wasn't doing a good job. It was not anything like that—I was just giving an added perspective.

Although Deb and the classroom teacher were good friends who saw each other socially, push-in services created unanticipated tension. In a conversation about the push-in situation, it was determined that Deb would begin pulling out the fifth grade students.

I never took it personally; she never took it personally. She just felt like she was—it just wasn't comfortable for her...she said, 'I don't know that this is working. It's not how I imagined it would be. I guess I just would rather you pulled them out.'

Collaboration among classroom teachers and reading specialists took many forms, at times push-in and pull-out models were static while other situations called for a more fluid approach to the reading intervention model such that push-in and pull-out were determined by the unit or by the needs of the group at any particular time. At times, push-in collaboration was a seamless pairing of two educators, yet this model did not accommodate all teachers' instructional or management styles making the pull-out model a better choice for some.

In the large rural district where Nancy served as a reading specialist, she and her colleagues tested students at the beginning of the year to determine needs and student groups. Nancy, her reading colleagues, and the reading assistants provided reading instruction and support for as many as seven, eight, or nine sections per grade level. Because they worked within and across grade levels, the reading personnel in the building believed they understood the needs of students in addition to understanding how scheduling might be accomplished; however,

the administration...allow[ed] the classroom teachers to see when they would like reading. So even though it may be better for us to do reading at a certain time, they may not want reading at that time so we have to do it when they want it so that makes [a] problem.

Nancy resisted this process because she believed students didn't always receive reading support at a time that would maximize their learning potential. The reading specialists also found difficulty with this scheduling arrangement because the individual classroom teachers didn't consider the master schedule while the reading specialists would have been able to look at the overall scheduling needs and take into account individual teacher and student group needs.

After the teachers provided their input regarding the reading schedule and the schedule was established, the reading specialists and classroom teachers determined how the students would receive reading support. Some negotiation was required as the needs of students, teachers' preferences, and schedules factored into each decision regarding push-in, pull-out, or a combination of the two methods. Nancy knew that there were individual preferences and that those preferences could differ greatly based upon the grade level involved.

Julie, Peggy, Anna, and Monica were each relatively new to their work in their individual districts or buildings, thus they had some experience and familiarity with the inner workings of the building culture yet they continued to gain access to the routines and expectations within their particular buildings. Each of them had responsibilities that were somewhat new, and therefore challenging, as they learned to negotiate both time management needs and personnel expectations for their performance. For example, Peggy found a new role demanding because it was "...a delicate process and not an easy one for me because I typically know that I work well with students and I'm learning this work with teachers, other teachers. So this is very new for all of us." She knew that the demanding nature of this responsibility would become easier for her and for the teachers so she was willing to embrace the process and work through the times when it felt difficult to work with teachers.

For the most part, reading specialists in this trope focused primarily on their work with students although a number of them were often consulted by their colleagues informally, a few served in a more formalized professional development or resource capacity. The informal resource opportunities often arose in connection with collaborative planning or conversations regarding students' academic needs.

### **Job In/Security**

Paul understood that people in the community held myriad viewpoints about education and the necessity of having reading specialists who worked with relatively small populations of students. He accepted the reality although he had not encountered these community members personally.

...some people don't see a need for my service, whether it's people in the community or maybe even some classroom teachers. I'm not saying it's what I've experienced but those are some stereotypes that come with the position.

Paul connected this impression with rumblings from community members or stories others had told comparing current educational realities with those remembered from past experience.

Maybe with budget increases...and people in the community seeing these extra programs for kids that they might not have had when they were in school. You know, the old 'Well, it was fine when I was in school, why do they need it now? Why do I have to pay for that kind of service?'

This type of comment was not infrequent or unanticipated from community members in light of potential property tax increases necessary to fund school budgets, yet, while he acknowledged and understood what lay behind the comments, he knew that his own job was tenuous and could be eliminated in the next budget cycle.

Paul anticipated the addition of fourth-grade AIS classes for the new academic year. His longer-range plans were to

...stay here with AIS, you know. I like it; I've thought about administration and I've seen the headaches they go through so I don't want to deal with that. Maybe catch—pick up a, you know—teach a summer class, you know, some place, you know, adjunct position here or there but I coach a lot so I don't really have time to do that during the school year. I love coaching so much that, you know, the position I'm in allows me to do that and I'll just stay with that.

His athletic coaching responsibilities throughout the year included JV/Varsity football, seventh-grade girls' basketball, and Varsity baseball. He perceived his work as a reading specialist and his coaching responsibilities as "...two different kinds of teaching..." that enabled him to get to know his students as scholars and athletes.

Paul intended to remain in education as a teacher despite having considered administration as a possible next step because there was "...not much...except the money" that appealed to him. In the event that his position was cut due to budget constraints, something Paul saw as a real possibility during the next budget cycle, he hoped to create "...a learning-focused pre-preschool/day care type of situation." He envisioned this preschool/day care option because he really enjoyed his work as a reading specialist, perceiving the possible business as a natural extension of his current employment with the understanding that he would continue coaching athletes. A day care/preschool would afford him the same schedule options and enable him to continue teaching small groups of students.

Julie was challenged in her first teaching position to incorporate reading instruction with unanticipated work with teachers; she often found herself modeling and teaching lessons with

only short notice. During her interview, Julie was surprised when ‘...nobody could give me a job description. Nobody knew what my job was and I guess they said it’s basically evolving.’ The principal told her that the reading program was hers and she could run it as she chose.

Julie’s experience varied between her first and second school districts. In her first reading specialist position, she had few clear expectations for her job, yet she came to realize that there was a tacit expectation that she provide professional development for classroom teachers. In her second school district, the expectations were more clearly delineated. The plan for instruction, assessment, and other aspects of the job were “very clear cut.” As a new teacher, Julie was assigned two mentor teachers—one for each building.

Neither Monica nor Peggy spoke of any concern about job security, rather they each spoke of the changes to their roles and the new expectations they had for their work in the upcoming school year. Peggy anticipated greater opportunities for networking with her reading specialist colleague at the “brother” school, an independent boys’ school run by the same administrative team as the girls’ school for whom she worked. She was engaged in curriculum work that would bring “...a new curriculum continuum rather than an isolated continuum in grade levels.” Monica’s work as a special education teacher and her knowledge of reading instruction would both be required in her work as “...the case manager for special education students, just one, which is rare.” She was responsible for collaborating and coordinating with other personnel working with the student. Her other responsibilities were teaching as an AIS provider for students in fourth grade in two buildings within the district.

Anna’s responsibilities were ongoing across school years; however, at the time of our interview, she noted that she was leaving her position and would no longer serve as professional developer/teacher support person in her next position. She was in the midst of planning a move

back to her home state to care for her ailing mother, which coincided with a job promotion for her husband. Anna had been offered a position teaching fifth grade at the school where she had been employed prior to one of several moves related to her husband's job. She was "...looking forward to getting back into the classroom with students and having the opportunity to use what I have learned since we left Florida." In Anna's situation, she did not feel a sense of concern nor did she need to wonder about the likelihood that she would continue in the same position for another school year.

Deb and Nancy had well-established careers as educators and had been teaching in their respective districts for over ten years. While that alone was not a guarantee that their jobs were secure, in their districts, with their years of seniority, it was unlikely that either Deb or Nancy would be concerned about losing their jobs. Deb could not "...imagine a school not having a reading specialist, but stranger things have happened," and she would return to the classroom. As the only reading specialist in the building, Deb believed she "...would stay here and retire in this type of work. Nancy, on the other hand, felt "relatively secure," as she was one of four reading specialists in a growing suburban district..

Some participants in this trope shared significant concerns for the future of their employment, while a few anticipated small changes and others expected their roles to remain much the same. Those who were veteran teachers, especially those who remained in the same district over many years, had fewer concerns about their job security or what their specific responsibilities would be from year to year. Conjecture about future employment created a need to consider options yet none of the participants had received notification of downsizing or staff reductions. As a result, those who were concerned about possible job loss continued to speculate as they performed their work and met their responsibilities to staff and students.



## **Job Flexibility**

Paul began his second year in the district with a change in responsibilities that included working with students across multiple grades to support reading and the elimination of previous responsibilities for computer class and sixth grade ELA. He used intervention programs for his curriculum; at fourth through sixth grades, they coincided with the basal series used by the classroom teachers, affording him opportunity to collaborate with his colleagues about student needs and progress and the curriculum. He would occasionally, "...branch off from that a little bit using the main idea of the lesson and fit it to each grade's needs."

In his own pedagogy, Paul hoped to have opportunities to challenge himself a bit to "...get out of that routine a bit more and try different things...to take a gamble on things a little bit more." He recognized that his athletic coaching responsibilities were largely responsible for the tendency to revert to routine rather than diversify his pedagogy.

I get busy during the year with coaching and everything and sometimes I just get complacent, you know, with what I'm doing. And I say that because it works but it wouldn't be a bad idea to try different things once in a while, to give it a shot.

Maintaining his position as a reading specialist and the job of athletic coach required Paul to make some sacrifices and prioritize his endeavors in ways that might not exist absent his coaching responsibilities. The need for sacrifices or the restructuring of his time impacted his work-life and his personal life, evidenced by Paul's fiancée's complaint, heard during coaching season, that he...

'...spend[s] more time doing that than you do with me' type of...so you've got to have a nice balance there and sometimes it's tough. When I get into the varsity sports...and

that's where I get the friction—from being a coach, not from being a teacher. I mean, sometimes I don't get home until 8-9:00 at night.

His fiancée didn't dislike what Paul did, although she "...thinks I don't work..." in light of his ten-month position. His friends were known to share somewhat sarcastic comments about teachers and their work schedules, thus adding to Paul's awareness of an existing negative view of the education system. Friends' comments shared a common theme,

'Well, you chose the job you wanted and I chose the job I wanted; it's not my fault you chose the wrong one.' That's a comment I say to a lot of my friends where, 'Oh, you only work 180 days and get your summers off.'

His standard response was simply "Well, you could have been a teacher," as he perceived their ridicule resulted from envy of his shorter work year and generous vacation schedule.

Monica's role as a reading specialist was enacted daily in her full-time work as AIS provider; in addition, she took on adjunct work at a local college teaching a literacy course. She drew upon her work as a reading specialist and her experience as a special education teacher, sharing aspects of her work, knowledge and experience she had gained, and pedagogy with the prospective teachers in the literacy class.

I think I have a little more "hands on" as to what reality is and what we're doing in the real world, and I think that that kind of keeps me grounded so that when I go back to work with my students in the elementary schools I have a different way of looking at them and I hope that my students [college level] will as well.

Monica shared that her college-level students appreciated that she drew from practical experience in her work as an instructor; in turn, Monica found the adjunct experience refreshing and energizing. She valued the opportunity to help develop the next generation of educators.

Julie's job required flexibility as she met the demands for teaching, planning, committee responsibilities in two buildings, as well as working with two principals and two faculties in similar yet different school cultures.

And I never get to go to the administrative one [meeting] because I'm in the opposite building. I can't leave and go back, which is fine, but they said the next one they were going to try to do in the afternoon.

In addition, she negotiated the logistics of daily travel and time management, organization of materials, and the need to maintain a flexible yet highly structured personal and professional schedule. While she acknowledged the demands placed upon her as she met her responsibilities, she embraced the opportunity to develop her skills and add to her repertoire of experience from which she could draw in future.

Peggy and Anna exhibited flexibility as they transitioned from their work-lives in banking (Peggy) and waitressing at Disney World (Anna) to new careers as educators and reading specialists. Both women worked for a number of years in other fields despite their initial interest in education. Peggy's undergraduate degree in elementary education was completed before she began working in the banking field while Anna's degree was completed during her last few years at Disney World. In both Peggy's and Anna's cases, they achieved their goal to teach yet they did not regret the years spent in other occupations. Peggy described her transition from banking to being a stay-at-home mom to teaching,

My husband was the one, you know, he said, 'I don't know why you ever left teaching because you love doing the library reading groups,' and I had a play group that came over to the house that I organized with a number of women."

In her narrative, Peggy drew on that experience, and her work as a substitute in her daughter's school, to support her decision to pursue a master's degree in literacy and to work as a reading specialist in a private school.

In a similar way, Nancy enjoyed flexibility in her career as an educator because it allowed her to take time from her teaching responsibilities to raise her children. The time she spent at home with her children enabled her to make the decisive move from secondary English education to the elementary classroom and subsequently to work as a reading specialist. "At the time I was looking for a job, there were no English jobs available. I had my reading certification so I decided to try teaching as a reading specialist." Additionally, Nancy maintained a flexibility of personal and professional time in order to serve as a summer school teacher. The flexibility of her work as a reading specialist aligned with her interests and lifestyle.

Deb met the literacy support needs of a K-12 building through thoughtful and strategic negotiation of schedules and time management. She provided support for the middle and high school levels in somewhat of a consultant capacity, meeting with teachers and working with students on an as-needed basis.

With K-6 I'm pretty wide open so I go, I meet individually with the teachers and find a time that works best for them around their specials and when they want me to work with their students...I only had to change my schedule, I think, once this fall based on—after specials change after those first few weeks of school when they realize they had too many kids doing phys. ed. at once or something like that. I've had basically the same schedule since about October.

Her years of experience in the building and opportunities to work with each teacher enabled her to understand the dynamics of each classroom, meet with teacher and students, and address

literacy needs at multiple levels. At times, the challenge required some finessing; however, the collegial support within the building made these negotiations more collaborative than fractious.

While classroom teachers could expect a high level of continuity in their routines from year-to-year, reading specialists' roles seemed to be subject to change as the demands for reading services and district decisions changed over time. All educators experienced a certain degree of uncertainty from time to time as district demographics fluctuated, creating a need for increases and/or decreases in the number of teachers at various grade levels, yet reading specialists' work assignments seemed to undergo such changes with higher frequency. Participants experienced some of these changes, thus developing some strategies for flexibility in those times of change.

Nancy began her teaching career as a secondary English teacher. She had experience as an elementary classroom teacher in addition to elementary reading.

I would go back to the classroom if I had to but I like that I don't have to bring things home. I like working with the small groups. I like working with a variety of age groups. I like what I'm doing, I really do. I think classroom's a lot harder.

Nancy valued the reading position because it enabled her to contain her work to the hours she spent in the building. She knew the after-hours commitments of English and elementary classroom teachers and preferred the variety she found as a reading specialist.

Monica enjoyed and valued her work in elementary school, whether it be working with reading students or those receiving special education support from her, yet she found herself particularly drawn to her work as a college-level instructor.

...I'm preparing these future teachers, and for all I know they could be my child's teacher, you know, and I think because I'm the mother of small children right now, I think I'm just that much more passionate about what needs to be right...

In the coursework she assigned, students in the teacher preparation program were expected to interview and/or work with students who were experiencing some reading difficulties. When the class met during the summer and elementary age students were not always readily available, Monica made arrangements through her network of parents and friends to help her college-level students complete the requirements and work with students.

She saw benefits in both elementary teaching and college-level instruction but her greater sense of fit came from her work in higher education. Friends commented about her hectic schedule, suggesting that she take a break from the adjunct teaching but Monica seemed to thrive on this work.

And I say, you know, really, I love it. I love talking with the adults and having these intellectual conversations and, you know, debating about what's right and what's not right, and listening to them and having their views because I learn just as much from them as they do from me, I would hope. So it's kind of intriguing to come in. I just look forward to it. I really do...as much as I love the little kids, it's just very different.

Monica's plan was to remain in her current work, as an elementary reading specialist, for about five years, then she planned to begin work as a consultant and continue working with adults involved in education.

## **Conclusion**

Participant narratives described their choices for undergraduate and graduate education that prepared them as teachers and as reading specialists. These reading specialists began their teaching careers in elementary, English secondary, or special education classrooms. A few participants' histories included work in fields other than education and one participant took

several years at home with her children. Teaching and advocating for students were the focus for these reading specialists while they sought ways to accommodate their work and personal lives.

Participants in this trope traveled various paths to their roles as reading specialists. Paul was in his third teaching position yet he was only five years out of school while Julie had worked in two schools with only two year's experience. Monica, Deb, and Nancy were veteran teachers who had experience teaching in other content areas before they began work as reading specialists. Peggy and Anna entered the teaching field later in adulthood, and like Nancy, spent time at home with their children. Each participant found ways to establish or re-establish themselves in their work environments.

Participants valued their work with students above other aspects of their roles as reading specialists. Their narratives described their efforts to teach reading and to provide a safe and caring environment where students felt confident as learners. Some participants described advocating for students during planning conversations or during meetings about a student's academic progress. Several members of this trope believed that working with smaller groups of students provided opportunities to gain insight into the academic and social needs of students, which facilitated their desire to help these students.

The work of reading specialists included responsibilities for instruction and for accompanying notes on student progress, data collection, and maintenance of student records. Paul's work as an ELA teacher meant that he graded student work, maintained those grades, and completed report cards for his students. Other reading specialists did not necessarily keep grades or enter information on report cards, yet they were responsible for providing updates on student progress to parents, teachers, and during CST/SBIT (student-focused) meetings. Although they considered their responsibilities for record-keeping time consuming, they gauged these

requirements as important to their work and much less demanding than those expected of classroom teachers.

Participant narratives reflected their level of job security. Those who were veteran teachers, like Monica and Nancy, felt relatively secure in the longevity of their positions. Others, who were new to their current positions and held less seniority, felt less secure. Paul's narrative reflected the greatest concern about his position, yet he optimistically created plans in the instance that he did lose his job.

Participants sought to manage both work-lives and out-of-work lives in symbiotic ways so that their personal lives supported their professional lives. By attending to personal, family, and professional interests, these individuals fueled themselves to perform their jobs with commitment to their students and colleagues. These outside interests and the period of finding their niche were varied in scope and duration. For some, the duration was brief—linked to a period of relocation and settling into a new school, while for others, who took time to care for young children, the period lasted several years.

A few members of this group continued to achieve and maintain flexibility to fulfill their work and out-of-work commitments. Whether long- or short-term, these individuals made the necessary changes in their lives to relocate, spend time with children, take on a new role as reading specialist, or incorporate other work, such as coaching, while maintaining their careers as educators. Many individuals felt that their role as reading specialists afforded them space and time in ways that classroom teachers did not have. Their work as reading specialists was focused on students, work with teachers, and fulfilling their daily obligations. Their narratives suggested that this work was enhanced or enriched by the ways they found to live fulfilling out-of-work lives.



Most reading specialists in this study took for granted that elementary teaching was typically, and historically, populated by women in the majority, yet the gendered nature of this notion was left unquestioned. A few participants did note their belief in the benefit of male teachers as role models at the elementary level. Paul acknowledged his own awareness of the assumption about men entering administrative positions, yet he chose to continue teaching because that schedule allowed him to continue his work as an athletic coach. Other narratives described caring and concern for their students' overall well-being, as well as their reading achievement—without linking this concern directly to any discussion of gender or women as nurturers. Participants' roles and their identities as reading specialists were shaped by educational policies and initiatives and by social expectations that normalized White females in elementary educational settings. Participant narratives displayed a tendency to conform to political and cultural hegemonic norms, rather than to challenge, question, or even acknowledge the ways their roles and identities were bound by these norms.

## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **FINDINGS: TEACHING AND COLLABORATING**

“Teaching and collaborating” described those participants whose narratives focused on the importance of teaching or working with students. They reflected on the day-to-day work with students, yet the narratives were laced with collegial interactions related to instruction. Participant narratives in this trope minimized aspects of leadership, or the importance of serving as a resource to teachers, yet participants served in those capacities on a regular basis, as shown through the stories they told about their work. Within this trope, participants’ awareness of the importance they placed upon collaboration, and its impact on their work as reading specialists varied widely from one participant to another.

Participant narratives described personal and professional situations that proved significant to their work, sometimes prompting major changes, yet the narratives continued to focus on their commitment to their students. The importance of collaboration emerged as a subtext of these narratives, whether or not participants recognized its influence on those narratives. To provide examples of these situations, Erica’s narrative was selected to represent this trope because it illustrated her struggles to maintain a focus on teaching while grappling with her lack of harmony with colleagues.

The importance of teaching and collaborating drove the narratives of seven women who, like Erica, identified teaching as the key component of their work, yet these participants’ narratives suggested that collaboration with teachers was indeed a critical facet of their work. Katherine, Lynn, Susan, and Camille were veteran teachers whose narratives described interactions with colleagues in a positive light. Katherine, Lynn, and Susan worked as reading specialists most of their careers while Camille had less than one year’s experience in this area.

Liz's narrative focused on her teaching and the ways she infused support for teachers into her work with students. Sarah's and Barb's narratives reflected concerns similar to those Erica experienced, yet they attributed the sense of perceived tension to their novice status as first- and second-year reading specialists, respectively.

Some narratives in this trope incorporated collaboration and aspects of leadership, clearly showing how work with colleagues forwarded their work as reading specialists. Other narratives hinted at this collegiality while a few, led by Erica's narrative, illustrated the value of collaboration in other narratives by its absence in her narrative. Participant narratives in this trope have been arranged within these categories, "Work with Students and Classroom Teachers," "They Don't Understand What I Do," "Misunderstood or Undefined Position," and "Do Whatever it Takes."

Reading specialists in this trope described teaching and working with students and colleagues, and some of the tensions they experienced in their work. The section, "Work with Students and Classroom Teachers" described how participants established and maintained a focus on teaching and their students. "They Don't Understand What I Do" described tensions that arose when collaboration between classroom teachers and reading specialists was lacking or ineffective. In the section, "Misunderstood or Undefined Position," participants described how conflicts occurred when colleagues did not have a clearly defined understanding of the reading specialist's role in their schools. "Do Whatever it Takes" described how reading specialists' adaptability supported their work with students.

### **Work with Students and Classroom Teachers**

Reading specialists in this trope focused their narratives on their teaching, their work with students, and experiences that shaped their work as reading specialists. Participant narratives

described pedagogy, including specific program expectations or changes that occurred over time, and strategies or routines that some participants found effective in their work as reading specialists. This section also described the ways participants dealt with perceived obstacles to teaching, those things that took time away from their ability to spend time with students, focus on instruction, and provide reading support.

Erica's experience as a reading specialist was shaped in unexpected ways by her personal experiences and by the expectations for her work. While Erica was still teaching in the classroom, her daughter became ill and required more of Erica's time and care; therefore, she sought the job as reading specialist because she believed it offered her the increased flexibility she needed to attend to the needs of her "sickly" daughter, although it "...scared [her] half to death to try."

Erica's transition from classroom teacher to reading specialist caused some uncertainty about the expectations for her role. Erica talked with the departing reading specialist to gain clarity about the responsibilities she was undertaking, but, ultimately, Erica was responsible for deciphering the job's expectations as she fulfilled them in her daily work.

...the only reason why I knew what I was supposed to do when I came to [the district] was by talking to [the reading specialist] before she left and then, and then what some of us did was type up our own job descriptions—what we did each year. And so, from one building to the next might look different, and then I had a check sheet of what things needed to be done during certain times of the year. But other than that, there is no formal job description for the reading teacher.

Erica's introduction to her work as a reading specialist was not dissimilar from that of most other reading specialists in that she received little direction from administration regarding the day-to-

day expectations for the position. As a reading specialist, she knew that it was her job to support students experiencing difficulty with the various aspects of reading. She felt responsible for providing the best support possible for her students yet the sole resource available to her was a departing reading specialist.

Erica's initial experience as a reading specialist was further complicated by an unanticipated supervisory responsibility with limited student contact. As the reading specialist in the building, she

...had three TAs [teaching assistants]. The TAs actually carried out a plan that I wrote, after I spoke with the teachers to see what they wanted, which really bugged the heck out of me because I wasn't working with kids. And so after a couple of years of doing that I said, 'This is for the birds. I really need to work with kids.' So that's what I did is that I started taking my own groups and working with the kids.

Erica questioned her decision to take the reading specialist position for the first two years, then she took advantage of the opportunity to make a change in the way reading services were scheduled. She began working with students, of her own accord, in order to realize her goal of working directly with them. After this change enabled her to work directly with students, she settled into her work as a reading specialist.

Erica extended her knowledge of reading instruction and remediation, bringing the enhanced understanding to her work with students and teachers. Early in her years as a reading specialist she participated in Reading Recovery training, characterizing her learning as "...the best tutorial out there." She adapted some Reading Recovery practices, designed to support first graders struggling with reading, to her practice across the grade levels, incorporating the fast pace and goal of "shifting" students in their awareness of their own reading practices. She

viewed her work with students, and her ability to diagnose the types of reading support they needed, as her greatest strength. “My strengths...definitely working with kids. Um, assessing where their weaknesses are, where their strengths are, and then pulling together their plan to get them to move...shift...I like to use that word.”

She worked with groups of students in a pull-out situation and enjoyed opportunities to collaborate in the classroom when her colleagues extended invitations for her to push-into their classrooms for instruction. She welcomed the opportunity to work with teacher and students, learning from them and sharing her own knowledge at the same time. Occasionally, this opportunity extended to regular meetings with grade level teachers to discuss student needs and plan instruction. For example, Erica and other reading specialists met regularly with first grade teachers to “talk about, you know, what things we could do to help with our kids, or what do we see is the issue...why they’re moving or whatever.” Erica supported her colleagues through these informal meetings, establishing a reading network, of sorts, for those in her building. Erica fully enjoyed these informal collaborations and gained from them. Other collaborations, perceived as forced or imposed, caused much conflict for her.

Liz was in her second year as a reading specialist. Early in her career, she taught third grade as a classroom teacher with reading instruction and support as a primary focus. Her students were a mixture of native English speakers and students learning English as a second language. She “...taught reading additionally, which at the time was not like a big thing to do but it wasn’t even heard of.” Liz was determined to meet the needs of her students experiencing difficulty with the phonics aspects of the curriculum; therefore, she incorporated a reading program taught through seminars. She worked with third grade students for four years and then was approached by her administrator with a request that she move to fifth grade and continue

incorporating the reading instruction. After the move to fifth grade, "...these kids did fantastically." She taught reading in this way "...from the minute they walked in the door 'til the end of the day." While Liz did not officially begin work as a reading specialist until years later, she considered all of her teaching experience to be focused on reading.

Lynn worked as a reading specialist in one rural district for thirty years. She was sometimes responsible for supporting all students in the K-6 building, a role that challenged her in terms of scheduling and meeting the needs of students and teachers. At other times, she and a colleague divided their responsibilities as reading specialists. When she shared responsibility with a reading specialist colleague, they met to plan schedules and lessons for those grade levels they had in common. They divided responsibilities based on student need and teacher preference, at times by grade level or in some cases by teacher so both reading specialists taught the same grade level. When Lynn served the entire population, she communicated and collaborated with classroom teachers to create a schedule which enabled her to provide reading support to students throughout the building.

When Maureen was here, I worked with K-3 and she worked with 4-6, then we both taught all grades and did literature circles. Now, I'm alone so I try to provide support for all grades but I focus mainly on K-3 or 4.

Lynn added Reading Recovery, an intervention program, to the background she gained through her master's degree coursework. She employed these skills as a Reading Recovery teacher and adapted them to work with all students. She provided professional development for her colleagues and showed them some of the strategies she learned from her training and experience. As she worked with students in classrooms she modeled strategies for classroom teachers who then used these strategies in their classroom reading instruction.

Katherine's experience as a reading specialist spanned several variations in reading support service delivery methods. The changes she described took her from a focus on students "...at opposite ends of the spectrum" when part of her day "...was spent with struggling readers and part of the day will be spent with what would be called enrichment or maybe even gifted and talented..." to a focus on remedial services or on helping struggling readers over the course of her 18-year tenure. This came, in part, as "...progressively more and more assessments came into place, which were identified with increasing numbers of students as needing remediation." Concurrently, students who received support from special education or resource teachers began "...accessing the services of reading specialists when there was a need for specific reading support." The mode of instruction varied from almost exclusively pull-out, because students were working in a "...separate and distinct program" in a reading room setting, to push-in services in order to meet an expectation that classroom and remedial instruction would have congruence. The most efficient way to meet this expectation was to have reading specialists work in the classroom with the classroom teacher.

Katherine saw a shift in the way reading specialists were perceived over this period of time. When students were pulled out of the classroom to go to the reading room for instruction, classroom teachers had very little understanding of the instruction their students received unless the reading specialist communicated with them about the students. When the shift to push-in and congruence occurred, reading specialists and classroom teachers taught together, and many if not all teachers planned together for these lessons; therefore, classroom teachers gained insight into the ways reading specialists developed their lessons as well as their instructional procedures. A more collaborative relationship developed as a result. For Katherine and her colleagues, this extended to a reform of the core language arts program. This reform



...influenced a change in the role of the reading specialist. I think I was—the reading specialists, myself included—were seen as being off over there, and as we worked on its reform, it brought the language and the reading people directly into roles, I guess, of significance in terms of the core language arts curriculum.

Out of this collaboration emerged weekly planning time where student needs were discussed and lessons were planned, thus moving reading specialists “...into the mainstream in to the core.” Reading specialists, Katherine especially, “...took on a strong leadership role and, at some point along the line, I became the Title 1 coordinator.” As the role developed, Katherine worked half of her day with students and the other half of the day as language arts coordinator. This continued for several years until a new administrator, who viewed the coordinator responsibilities as part of the principal’s job, asked Katherine to return full-time to the teaching aspect of her work.

Sarah, the only reading specialist for a K-5 building, had formal and informal opportunities to provide professional development. Each day Sarah met informally with teachers to review student progress, review instructional procedures, and plan instruction for the following day. Sarah’s more formal professional development included familiarizing classroom teachers with assessments, reading materials and programs, and key areas of reading development and instruction such as phonological awareness. She met with some resistance from teachers who

...have been there a long time and ...get to the point where they view a lot of these changes as ‘old hat.’ It’s like, ‘Oh, another mandated change that in a year it’s going to be a different mandated change,’ and you know, ‘...when is it ever going to end?’

Sarah felt concern about veteran teachers' reception of new information about research or practice, especially when it disagreed with their current practice. She tried to remind herself that she should not take comments or disagreement personally but view them as teachers' concern that existing practice—or what worked—was being cast aside without considering the knowledge of educators who worked daily with students in the classrooms.

Camille's experience as a K-12 special education teacher, teaching reading, ELA, and mathematics was very valuable in her capacity as a reading specialist. She worked primarily with students in grades four and five and with individual students at lower grades who needed the type of support Camille was able to provide.

What I tend to do is take the kids who are more challenging, because that is, obviously, my background. I've never gone above a second to third grade level in any of my teaching. It's all been at the primary level, so I tend to take the kids who are either special needs, or, if they're not necessarily labeled, the ones who are a year—two years behind, haven't been getting it in the regular classroom so maybe we can figure out something else to do.

Camille drew from her previous experiences, collaborated with classroom teachers, and provided support for students to meet their individual needs. The support might include modifying the pacing of instruction or the number of spelling words a student was responsible for learning. While she did not perceive herself as patient, she did have "...really high expectations that...you're going to learn something and we're going to figure out a way for you to do it."

Barb worked with students in Kindergarten and first grade only—a total of eight classes, using a combination of push-in and pull-out because she found the delivery method was impacted by the classroom climate. She used music and poetry as she taught phonemic

awareness, often making materials that she then left in the classrooms for students' and teachers' use later on.

Barb described the population in her building as being very White with “maybe four or five African American kids out of 300, and a farm migrant/semi-permanent population who came “...from Mexico and live on these local apple farms, immoral, but a whole other topic.” In these families, the kids stayed but the “...dad has to go back home every so many months for a certain amount of time.” The families were composed of mothers who didn't speak English and stayed with the children.

Who can say, as a rule, every family, every culture has dysfunction, but they usually come from incredibly loving homes and another thing I've known that the phonemic awareness [ability to hear and isolate the individual sounds in words] from these Spanish-native Spanish speaking kids is phenomenal. I work with these kids...a different bunch of kids for the last four or five years, kids who are receiving ESL; they are also Title 1 and I have never had one who did not have strong phonemic awareness skills. Isn't it interesting?

Barb used the connections between music and reading to support the developing literacy skills of her students at these early primary grades. She encouraged flexible groupings and a combination of push-in and pull-out to meet the changing needs of all her students, as well as those of the classroom teachers.

Susan's work involved providing staff development in varied aspects of literacy instruction and program implementation. She worked with teachers in districts across the region to provide “...training in guided reading, balanced literacy, writing, and...working with groups of teachers in high needs schools to help them think about instruction.” She saw aspects of her

work connected to what is often perceived as a coach's role and valued the opportunities this presented for her to meet with kids but also to have an impact that is "...bigger—I can impact one kid, or I can impact 300." She valued her work for its affording opportunity to make the larger impact.

### **They Don't Understand What I Do**

Reading specialists functioned within the typical school schedule yet their schedules included some degree of flexibility to meet the daily demands of administrators, teachers, and students. Classroom teachers might cancel reading classes for various reasons, or reading specialists might be called upon to serve as a substitute or to meet with other professionals in a building, sometimes with little notice. Due to the reality that reading specialists served many masters, some schedule changes or demands placed upon the reading specialist may not be communicated to all classroom teachers, thus creating some tension, misunderstandings or conflict.

Erica experienced this in a variety of ways throughout her career. Her experience as a classroom teacher provided an understanding of the demands of the classroom teaching position just as she knew the reality of the reading specialist. She described some of the tensions she felt as a reading specialist. Elementary teachers "...complain a lot (laughs). They complain a lot and they see my position as a...as a cake position, and I'm like, you've got to be kidding me—at the elementary level? This position is not cake." Teachers complained to Erica when they were asked to include a new element into their current reading instruction. Curricular expectations would come from the administrator of the building yet Erica heard the complaints, if "...they had to do one more thing, and it had to do with reading, well then you really heard about it." Erica discussed the tensions with her administrator.

And so I did end up telling my principal, I said, ‘Well, nobody knows what anybody goes through, unless they’re walking in their shoes. See, they already know what a classroom teacher goes through, because they’re classroom teachers, but they don’t know what anybody else does. So they complain a lot.’

She acknowledged that elementary teachers are “...the building blocks for what happens at secondary” and that they have a great responsibility, but she would have appreciated an awareness of her own contribution to the process of preparing students for the future.

Erica spoke of “shifting” her students, a term she picked up from her Reading Recovery work. She believed it was essential that instruction be based upon student data, whether it be assessment data or day-to-day classroom performance, each was valid and helped create a snapshot of the whole child. “When you are in this position,” Erica began, “you really have to look at the whole child, everything that’s going on. And I think you do, you need to meet with teachers because reading is everywhere.” Erica encountered teachers who were equally interested and willing to meet and plan with her. At the same time, she met resistance from others.

And of course, I always talk in terms of shifting, you know, shifting them up. I got an email from this one teacher that said, ‘Well, could you take so and so and get her to shift?’ It was the tone of what she wrote. Of course, I wrote back and I said, ‘Sure, I’ll take a peek.’ I did. I took the student and gave her...looked at the DRA [Developmental Reading Assessment] that the teacher had done. I did a different DRA, and after about a week and a half, I did a DRA again, and then you line them up and you see what’s different between each of those DRAs. But you have to look at them and you have to analyze them.

Erica went on to describe the growth she saw as she worked with this student. She closed this part of her narrative by saying, “I really do love this position.” Her narrative showed the areas of tension around her work with colleagues. She “loved” her work with students and valued opportunities to share with like-minded colleagues yet she struggled to find common ground with others.

Erica believed the use of formative assessment (an informal check of student learning) data was critical to student progress. When teachers assessed their own students, they were able to see growth over time and be cognizant of the specific errors students were making. Then, following their assessments, teachers would be better able to plan instruction to address those areas of need for each student. In her own practice, Erica used assessment information to help her students “shift” in their reading ability. She believed that teachers would see the same types of progress if they adopted these same methods of assessment and targeted planning and instruction.

And that’s the thing that classroom teachers do not understand is that when you’re in this position it’s a juggling act because not only are you juggling kids and you’re planning for all these kids, you also have to do the testing for all these kids.

Planning with teachers for push-in or pull-out instruction was sometimes difficult. Erica’s teaching schedule included groups of students pulled simultaneously from multiple classrooms. When she worked with a single class, Erica sometimes combined the two modes, pushing into a classroom for a few days and then pulling out the students on alternate days.

Erica was responsible for assessment in addition to her instructional responsibilities and the unstated responsibility of building relationships with classroom teachers,

...classroom teachers need to know that your job is your job. And part of your job is to establish a rapport with the adults in your building. And they see that as you're wasting time. You could be working with kids. You know, that was kind of tricky.

Assessment responsibilities took much of Erica's time, reducing the time she was able to spend with students. She tested new entrants, students referred for special education services, and students requiring ongoing progress monitoring following a School Based Intervention Team (SBIT) meeting. In addition, to encourage teachers to conduct their own assessments of their students, Erica taught lessons in teachers' classrooms while the classroom teacher administered the formative assessments to students.

Sarah also experienced challenging situations and conversations with colleagues as the implementation of RTI (Response to Intervention) became established in the building. She was surprised by the strength of some of her colleagues' reactions. Classroom teachers approached Sarah saying, "You know, this is not against you personally, we're against what the state has mandated." Under RTI, the State Education Department required a tiered approach to intervention services; thus, students would receive their first intervention within the classroom from their classroom teacher for a specified period of time, before receiving reading support from a reading specialist as an additional service.

Unlike many of her colleagues, Sarah held a favorable opinion of the new RTI framework and its potential for providing levels of additional support among students struggling in reading or other areas.

I think it's a good thing but I think it's going to be a really hard thing for people to see that it's a good thing. I think that it's really good that teachers are being expected to

know the gray area [for] kids within their classrooms because otherwise you're just teaching to the middle, I feel like, and so it's really forcing teachers to—it's more work, I know it and I feel for them, I really do and I listen to them and I take it all in because I don't think they are wrong in any way for complaining. It is a lot of work.

She recognized and empathized with the concern classroom teachers felt that their students might wait additional time before receiving reading services because they followed the RTI protocols. She reassured them, letting them know that the opposite should be true, "...if we do it right, you should be getting those kids help earlier." Sarah tried to present information and program changes in a positive light to encourage teachers to remain positive as well.

Lynn, Liz, Katherine, Susan, and Barb were less troubled by a sense of misunderstood roles within the building. Lynn and Katherine worked very closely with teachers in the classroom and talked with them often about student growth and achievement. They both described their relationships with colleagues as being close and mutually supportive. Katherine believed that she and her fellow reading specialists were "...viewed ...as resource people for them [classroom teachers] and very strong support systems for them, so regardless of title, regardless of whatever, I was still there." Liz and Susan provided a high level of support for teachers, whether as a reading specialist in the classroom in Liz's case, or through professional development offerings and modeling in the classroom, in Susan's case. For both women, the support provided to classroom teachers was viewed positively; therefore, they were accepted and welcomed into conversations and into classrooms.

Barb's experience in the building was one of feeling accepted and welcomed, as compared to her previous experience in a different district. She attributed the difference in the teachers' attitudes towards her to the difference in the building climate; the previous building's



climate was "...cranky competitive" while her current building climate was one where people were "...outspoken and questioned things and where they were very positive about the kids." She valued these traits and chose to work in the building because she knew the staff shared these values.

Camille served as a member of the building's School-Based Intervention Team (SBIT) charged with reviewing students' academic progress and making recommendations for instruction to support learning; as a member of this team she supported teachers as they worked to design instruction that would meet the needs of students not achieving academic success. Camille was not required to attend all meetings of the team but she chose to "...so I can keep a finger on kids who are struggling and what they're doing to help those kids."

When Camille began working as a reading specialist, following many years of work as a special education teacher, a friend commented on the suitability of her new role.

Reading has always been my passion. I'm one of those classroom teachers that would sit and struggle through the math book, but the rest of my day revolved around any kind of reading...in fact, a friend of mine—I've known her since we were four...she said, 'It's about time you finally have an appropriate job. If anyone should be a reading specialist, it should be you.'

Camille knew that her work as a special education teacher led to her position as a reading specialist. Because she continued to make use of her prior experience in the new role, she was crafting the position as she carried out the expectations and responsibilities aligned with the job. With experience working in several buildings throughout the district, Camille had watched reading specialists "...and how differently they approach their jobs, and what they brought to it. So I just thought I could bring something to the job and with my experience with challenged

readers.” Unlike others in this trope, she didn’t focus on a lack of understanding from others rather, she concentrated on the ways that her work as a special educator helped her shape her work as a reading teacher.

### **Misunderstood/Undefined Position**

Reading specialists in this trope experienced varying degrees of acceptance from classroom teacher peers. These individuals, who were working in schools where their roles were not well defined, met with some conflict from classroom teachers, or they felt a need to prove themselves to classroom teacher colleagues. These reading specialists focused their attention on teaching, but like many others, fulfilled many roles including a leadership role. Unlike those reading specialists in the leadership trope, these participants did not always respond enthusiastically to the leadership responsibilities. However, when the classroom teachers sought out their help, reading specialists were quite willing to aid them, thus enacting the leadership role, albeit in an informal way.

Erica worked in a large suburban district for over 15 years as a classroom teacher and a reading specialist before serving as a teacher on special assignment to support the new reading/language arts series. She enjoyed visiting classrooms to observe guided reading lessons and to work with the classroom teachers, supporting their instruction during guided reading. When Erica’s supervisor asked her to observe teachers’ implementation of the series to ensure that the primary teachers were doing guided reading in their classrooms, conflicts arose.

They had me...I was working in the district at the district level with the new series and I will tell you that my strength is not...it was...I don’t think it is...I don’t know...is trying to get teachers to do what they need to do. I don’t like telling...I don’t want to tell them and, you know, to try to come up with the words to get them to accept from you.

She explained the responsibility in a bit more depth as she described an incident connected with her responsibility as teacher-on-special-assignment to supervise implementation of the reading series. The administrator asked Erica to

‘...just go in and see how they’re doing their guided reading.’ And I said, ‘Okay.’ Well, I did what she wanted me to do. I emailed [the classroom teacher] and I said, ‘If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to come in during a time when you’re running your centers and doing guided reading and just try to help out.’ Can I just tell you, I got reported to the Union.

Erica added, “I’m in the Union! I’m in it!” She believed she was reported to the Union, “...because I wanted to come in when they were doing guided reading. They saw me as an administrator. They see the reading position as an administrative...”

Erica viewed her work as teacher-on-special-assignment, as an opportunity to work closely with students and classroom teachers to make the most effective use of the reading series. Moving from room to room while teachers worked with students allowed Erica to compare instruction across classrooms, work with teachers, and develop some consistency for delivery within the grade levels using the program. She was unaware of the tensions among the classroom teachers until she was notified of the complaint to the Union and was asked to provide an accounting for her time and daily schedule.

...this is what it was...when I sat there and explained my job...for one thing, they think you’re administration, which is the first misconception. The second thing is they have no idea what you do in your job. So, when I sat there and did that, at the beginning of the following year...he said, ‘She had no idea of what you do.’ And I said, ‘No kidding.’

But don't...I mean, I am on the same playing field with the rest of you...I am a teacher, just because I'm not in the classroom doesn't mean...

While this conversation eased Erica's anger a bit and provided some sense of closure for her, she remained cautious in her interactions with her colleagues. Ultimately, she left that district to work in another suburban district nearby.

She reflected on the significance some inferred from the reading specialist title. Erica referred to herself as a reading teacher because she believed that use of the term specialist conveyed a sense of superiority with which she felt uncomfortable. In her experience, those who called themselves specialists positioned themselves in a way to take charge or to exhibit authority or superiority over their colleagues. Erica chose to use the term reading teacher in order to reinforce her belief that she was a teacher.

And even that, some people call themselves teachers, some people call themselves specialists, now [...] calls herself a specialist. I'm afraid to say that word because I don't think I have all the answers on reading so I just don't like to call myself a specialist. Erica resisted the reading specialist title, sensing an implication of expertise with which she was not comfortable. The tension she sensed in her colleagues stemmed from an earlier time, before Erica worked in the district. At that time, the reading specialist held a more formalized leadership role and the memory of that time remained in the minds of Erica's colleagues.

They see the reading position as an administrative...because when I got there, they used to have an administrator who took care of organizing the testing and everything. And then that went onto the reading teacher position so these classroom teachers all thought that.

Erica's fear of identifying herself as anything other than a teacher typified most of the participants in this study, indeed even those reading specialists who claimed leadership as the primary focus of their work hesitated to identify themselves as different from their teacher colleagues. Nevertheless, participants perceived that their classroom teacher colleagues saw reading specialists as "other," perhaps because of the perceived ambiguity of their responsibilities and the multiple ways they enacted their work.

Erica's narrative described tensions with administration and classroom teachers in ways that other participants did not. In her narrative, she recounted a story of conflict with her colleagues over misunderstood expectations for her position.

They don't understand the nature of the reading position, and so they see you as not having kids all the time like they do. But what they don't understand is that there are many days you don't get a lunch. You know and Heaven forbid if you go to the bathroom and I mean, it got so bad, I'll tell you, it got so bad in my building, I really think I must've really--I have no idea what I did, but it was horrible. I had the building reps meet with me and they wanted to know how many minutes it took me to leave my room, go and get the kids and then come back to test them. And I looked at them and I said, 'You have got to be kidding me; you're kidding me right?' And I got mad and I said, 'You want to see a Black lady get mad; you keep this up.' And I was so infuriated. I could feel myself getting very hot and I got up and I said, I'm going to leave here right now before I lose my mind and I said 'I'll tell you what if you want me to be mean and miserable so that I can keep track of all this stuff -- this petty stuff that you're talking about me about right now, I said that it's just exactly what I will do.' And then I

explained to them, you know before I got really upset, I explained to them just what my job entailed.

Erica's narrative failed to make explicit any connection between the tension she experienced and her race, yet her story implied this connection. Her reaction to the building representatives, "You want to see a Black lady get mad; you keep this up," suggested her sense of "otherness" in that she might have a response unlike that of a White woman.

Erica was a veteran teacher with twenty-seven years' experience as a classroom teacher and reading specialist. She was an African American woman, raised and educated in a predominantly White, middle class, suburban area. She grew up and was educated in a primarily White neighborhood in a school with a majority of White students.

Erica spent her childhood in a predominantly White, middle class, suburban area and she attended school in with a majority of White students. She commented that she "sounded White." She was keenly aware of the surprised looks that often registered on the faces of many a new acquaintance when meeting for the first time after communicating by phone. She went on to say that her husband was known to chide her for "acting White," because of her speech patterns.

She acknowledged the resulting tension inherent in her identity as a Black woman whose upbringing in a mostly White, middle class suburb situated her at the intersection of sometimes competing social spheres. She noted that she would "code switch" at times but that she usually felt more comfortable with the speech patterns of her youth, despite the tensions that created.

Barb's experience as a classroom teacher moving into a reading specialist position was that reading specialists were expected to take students from the classroom and "fix" them. She was gaining the confidence she needed to share ideas and materials with classroom teachers, so students might receive support from Barb or from the classroom teacher when Barb was not in

the room. She wanted classroom teachers to realize that her work was intended to support their work with students.

Some teachers are wonderful. Some don't want to hear it. They don't want to be told what to do. They don't, you know, it's a delicate balance, you are like the ultimate co-dependent in this job because you have eight different teachers, all different personalities. Some are very easy going; some aren't. Some suck in anything you want to tell them and you collaborate, you talk about the kids and you feel like you are sisters. Some, they feel defensive no matter what you say or do. I think women are in helping positions and we are just hard on ourselves, we are hard on each other and that's too bad.

Barb tried to be aware of the ways that teachers reacted to her attempts to provide resources and to collaborate. She carefully planned her next steps accordingly, to address the needs of her students. She tried to be open to discussions and to keeping the focus on student needs and the teacher's explanation of students' areas of concern.

Few reading specialists received clear direction regarding the responsibilities and expectations of their role when they began their work. Some gained insight from classroom teaching experience in the same building or district while others drew on reading specialist colleagues or out-going reading specialists for clarification about their new roles. Others worked on their own, or with colleagues, to define their role while they continued to enact the roles they were attempting to define. In various ways, these individuals took on tasks and responsibilities to serve administrators, colleagues, and students yet rarely were these duties delineated or part of a long-range plan. Many participants filled these additional roles because they served in that ambiguous quasi-administrative role. Others, like Barb, set clear boundaries for themselves in resistance to the leadership role.

Barb's narrative presented opposition to administrative requests that she serve in a coaching capacity. She described the tension she and Kyle (pseudonym), another reading specialist, felt.

...our principal really recognizes our expertise and respects it and so we've got...woke up a little and whatever, but have the actual concrete day-to-day expectations changed? In some ways they could have but we have resisted. I have felt for a while like they really wanted [Kyle] and me to become reading coaches without increased compensation. There have been times, especially with our curriculum person where she wanted us to pick up more in terms of being coaches, but we didn't want to be administrators and have the teachers we work with feel like we were policing them in any way. So, we didn't openly decline, we just sort of passively didn't. Like she would hint at it strongly in meetings, 'Oh, this is something [Kyle] or you could do,' or, you know, and we would just sort of smile and, but you know, we were very careful. We have been very careful not to be turned into coaches. I would love to have a job as a reading coach. I would love to do half-time reading, [and] coach half-time.

Barb's resistance invoked contractual notions of boundary lines between teacher and administrator. She resisted the coaching opportunity, despite her personal interest in serving as a coach, because it asked for additional work and responsibility without a commensurate pay increase. She negotiated this tension in a way that satisfied work requirements while it allowed her to remain true to her principles.

Barb's uncertainty illustrated many participants' narratives of internal conflict about the types of boundaries they envisioned but rarely drew around their work. Several participants shared narratives of conflict around union issues or state testing, yet they found little opportunity



to take action on this internal conflict. Their narratives described their own sense of conflict yet their sense of duty as representatives of the school and their responsibility to students led them to sublimate that conflict and prioritize their teaching goals.

Susan, Lynn, Liz, Camille, and Katherine shared various stories of serving as a resource for teachers. They strove, in all their collegial work, to be collaborative to avoid misrepresenting themselves to colleagues in ways that would create tension and risk alienating their classroom teacher colleagues. Liz found informal ways to support her teacher colleagues. She acknowledged the delicacy with which she needed to provide this support. “That part of it...and this is touchy...that part of it, I try to share with my colleagues in the department. I try to do it in a way that’s not, ‘I know this and you don’t.’” Lynn’s narrative described working with teachers or in parallel with classroom teachers to provide additional support for students. She “...shared what I learned through Reading Recovery with the teachers and helped them find ways to use those ideas in their classrooms.” Other participants described a variety of means by which they served in informal yet highly supportive resource roles for a few teachers, or in Susan’s and Katherine’s narratives, for a sizeable number of classroom teachers.

Sarah’s experience as a first-year reading specialist challenged her to know how best to reconcile her position as new teacher with the perception that she was expected to possess knowledge beyond that of classroom teachers.

You’re not part of a grade level; you’re a ‘stand-on-your-own’ and they come to you and ask you questions about—and being a first year in that position was really hard. But you know, they come to you and you’re like, well, you’re our reading specialist for K-12 and everybody wants to come to you.

Sarah combined her own knowledge and the resources available to her to support teachers. She found requested information and shared it during common planning times with teachers or through professional development. These methods helped bring teachers to a mutual understanding because Sarah shared the same information with all of them and it helped Sarah develop relationships as she gained greater understanding of her new colleagues and new work environment.

### **Do Whatever It Takes**

Narratives in this section described various means reading specialists employed to serve students with whom they worked. Some participants described working beyond the school day to achieve their goals while others worked with parents and teachers to support students.

Erica loved her work with students and experienced great satisfaction when they responded positively to the instruction and support she provided. For Erica, this included helping the students at all grade levels to engage in and take responsibility for their own learning. As she shared a story about one first grade girl with whom she worked, Erica talked about the ways she supported students in gaining reading skills and knowledge and a greater degree of responsibility. To facilitate her work with this student in particular, Erica spent time at a bookstore pouring over books on child behavior. She incorporated the information gained into her work with the student, even sharing it with the parents while she shared the results of her reading instruction. She called this student, "...one of my greatest success stories ever."

Erica found ways to remain connected to the classrooms and ongoing instruction even though she was unable to be in all the classrooms often enough to keep current with the content her students were learning.

Well I think what happens at the elementary level is the special ed. teachers really push-in a lot and the reading teachers really didn't push-in a lot so I think what happened—even the TAs—I always got a sense that the TAs were more connected to the classroom teachers than I was. So what I had to do was make a connection with the TAs, you know, so I could hear what was going on in the classroom, so I could tweak things.

She was able to identify the areas of focus in the classroom and was then able to make decisions to align her instruction as closely as possible with student's classroom progress.

Some participants dealt with teaching conditions that were out of the ordinary. Lynn's description of her classroom during her first years in the district provided an example of the way some reading specialists were required to make the best of a situation. During her early days as a reading specialist in the district, Lynn worked with groups of students under somewhat adverse conditions.

I had maybe ten kids in a group, and it was K-6. It was difficult...I was down across from the boiler room in the basement in that building and it was very noisy. It [the room] was tiny, and it was shaped like a hallway. It was long and narrow, and it had a table so that when my children came and sat down, they couldn't get out. When one person would get out, everybody had to get up too.

Lynn's room assignment varied based on the grade levels she taught and the space available during a given year. After a separate K-6 building was built, she shared a room with another reading specialist. At another time, her classroom adjoined those used by the building and district administrators. Toward the end of her career, Lynn's room was a small, oddly shaped space adjacent to the teacher's lounge and rest room. Nevertheless, she found ways to make the

spaces work for her students and herself, knowing that many times she would be moving to another location at the end of the school year.

Several participants whose primary focus was teaching worked as adjunct instructors, in addition to their elementary teaching responsibilities. Each of these individuals worked with undergraduate or graduate students in literacy courses at local state universities or at a small, private liberal arts college. These reading specialists described their work as adjunct instructors in ways that conveyed their belief that teaching pre-service and masters level teachers was a logical extension of their work in elementary schools.

Katherine enjoyed two years as a full-time instructor at the state university; however, she “...began to get the bug to be back with kids. I was already missing them and a position opened at a small rural district near my home.” She became a K-4 reading specialist the following September and continued to teach undergraduate and graduate level courses online and during the summer. Like Katherine, Monica, Barb, and Susan taught courses as adjunct instructors at the post-secondary level; however, these women continued their work in the school systems while they taught a class or two in the evenings or during summer sessions. Monica and Susan taught literacy courses or a reading clinic course. While Barb was at home when her children were too young for school, she taught an undergraduate course and supervised undergraduate student teachers. When she took on the role of reading specialist, she continued to serve as an instructor in the literacy department.

Sarah, Camille, and Barb were each quite new to their positions as reading specialists. They shared experiences where their flexibility, knowledge, and diplomacy were put to the test, yet they did not have the variety of examples shared by others in this trope. Sarah’s knowledge and diplomacy were tested when veteran teachers asked for clarification about Response to

Intervention expectations, for example; while Camille called upon her ability to be flexible to meet the demands of testing, teaching and serving as a reading and special education resource to her colleagues. Barb brought her theater arts background into her work as a reading specialist, creating lessons that incorporated music, drama, and other kinesthetic movements into the specific literacy skills.

Camille was the only participant I found who was serving as a reading specialist who did not hold a master's degree in reading. She was considered a highly-qualified teacher because she had twenty-one years of experience as a special education teacher teaching primarily self-contained classes. She was approved by the district to teach in a reading specialist capacity where she provided instruction for groups of students in need of reading support and small-group instruction.

She integrated her work as a special education teacher with her work as a reading specialist, calling upon her ability to modify and adapt expectations to support students as they develop the skills that will help them achieve. Camille believed that "...my number one priority is that child. I've got to teach that child something, somehow..."

To provide additional teaching support for struggling students, Camille worked with classroom teachers and special education teachers to support their students.

I think, because it's an inclusive building, I am a support for the special education teachers as well...and the principal relies on me a lot as well, in terms of, 'Okay, what's going on with this and, you know, what does this mean...what should we do with this person.'

The administrator placed Camille in a resource position so she might assist him as well as her colleagues. She enjoyed the opportunity to work with her colleagues, especially the planning and

modifying that supported student learning and development. She hoped that her work with her colleagues would help them be able to implement support for students at all levels throughout their curriculum and she celebrated their collaborative efforts.

Many participants spoke of the informal leadership roles they enacted. Often, elementary schools employed one or two reading specialists for a K-6 building. When a classroom teacher, or other staff member, had a question about literacy or the literacy program, the reading specialist was sought out as a source of knowledge or information. This informal, one-on-one sharing felt more comfortable for some participants because it was more collegial, with a sense of give and take of ideas.

Liz frequently had teachers stopping to ask her advice or to share an event or success from their classroom or work in the field.

Those teachers will very often will come to me and say, 'I need something to teach this.

The child is not getting this.' So, I'll either push in during that first month and help out or train someone who she'll have long-term...

Liz encouraged this collaboration; she seemed to find new energy from her interactions with colleagues and enjoyed sharing her own knowledge and experiences with them. While Liz had not been in her position as reading specialist for many years, she attended professional development and other learning opportunities as often as she could. She took these opportunities for learning, incorporated new knowledge into her own practice and shared that learning with her colleagues.

## **Conclusion**

Participants shared teaching as a goal of their undergraduate studies, though not all participants focused on elementary education. Susan studied psychology, Katherine studied

music education, and Camille majored in English education. Most participants majored in reading during their graduate studies while Camille focused on special education. Their studies led to teaching careers that were relatively straightforward. Although their narratives described little variation in their careers, Erica and Liz described significant personal events that changed the course of their teaching lives.

These participants placed exceptional value on their work as teachers and they found ways to serve in variations of that role despite disruption to their careers. Liz tutored students and Barb supervised student teachers and served as an adjunct instructor to continue their teaching careers in some way. For these participants, collaboration with colleagues, focused on student growth and addressing student needs, emerged as a structural cornerstone of reading specialists' work in that they found collaboration to be a valuable piece when providing instruction and support for the students they had in common. For some participants this was as simple as shared opportunities to plan lessons, share ideas or to discuss curriculum and student progress; for others it involved collaboration as a team, through co-teaching, curriculum work, student-focused meetings, or shared professional development opportunities.

Most reading specialists in this trope acknowledged the ways collaboration benefitted their work with students and colleagues. Conversely, Erica had little, if any, positive experience in many of her collaborations with colleagues, except in those situations where others sought out or initiated the collaboration. The varied experiences of these participants may suggest that collaborations that developed organically as reading specialists and classroom teachers interacted enjoyed greater likelihood of success, whereas forced collaborations, designed by administrators or others, lacked the participants' support.

Participant narratives described some of the differences in perception classroom teachers and reading specialists held about reading specialists' work and their responsibilities. Reading specialists filled teaching roles that were similar to those of classroom teachers, yet their roles included responsibilities for assessment and support of the reading program that were unlike those of classroom teachers. Some participants perceived disapproval from their classroom teacher colleagues or, as in Sarah's narrative, they perceived a need to be highly attentive to colleagues' needs and to anticipate potential concerns.

Reading specialists throughout this study described beginning their work without clearly delineated responsibilities. Erica, Barb, and Sarah shared narratives describing internal conflict and interpersonal tensions that arose, in part, because the roles of the reading specialist were not understood or because they seemed ambiguous to some teachers. Barb experienced a conflict because she wished to take on a coaching role but would not go against her contract or her colleague's recommendation. Erica experienced tension with colleagues due to misunderstanding and a lack of shared understanding of her role. An inability to communicate about the roles and responsibilities teachers and reading specialists shared and those that were particular to reading specialists created the conflicts or tensions participants described.

Reading specialists' narratives described their attention to teaching and their desire to provide students with appropriate learning experiences. Several participants engaged in teaching opportunities as adjunct instructors, in addition to their work in elementary schools. These participants believed that teaching, and the learning and preparation necessary to teach undergraduate and graduate classes complemented and enhanced their work with elementary students. Other participants further developed their own knowledge to enhance their work with students and provide support for students' reading proficiency.



Participant narratives reflected little awareness of the ways social forces informed their work or the identities they constructed as reading specialists. Narratives shared evidence of reading specialists' efforts to provide instruction that met students' academic, social, and emotional needs and the care reading specialists gave to their students. Participants did not connect caring with their identity as women or with the stereotypical norms of elementary teacher as nurturer. Erica's narrative described her identity as a Black woman, who enacted her middle class status, and the norm of a caring elementary teacher. Her narrative was complicated by her description of the tension she felt as she enacted and negotiated White middle class speech patterns or African American Vernacular English. Erica enacted multiple identities in her work as an elementary reading specialist, as did each participant in this study. Erica's narrative illuminated the intersectionality of the multiple identities she enacted and drew upon in her work.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore the narratives of 22 elementary reading specialists about their work. It asked: What were reading specialists' narratives about their work and their influences? Previous research explored reading specialists' roles yet thus far has failed to theorize beyond classification of those roles. This study extends existing research by considering what reading specialists tell us about their work and the ways their narratives help us see through the sometimes-messy complexity of that work.

This chapter begins with a summary of the three findings chapters. Next, it provides a conclusion describing how these findings confirm or extend the current literature on reading specialists and the influences that shaped participant narratives, including the complex nature of their work in elementary schools.. Then, the chapter states the limitations of this study and the barriers established by my own perspective toward this study. Finally, the chapter describes implications for future research, for school officials, and for teacher education programs.

### **Summary of Findings Chapters**

Chapter Four, "Leadership," reported on reading specialists whose narratives focused primarily on the ways they performed leadership responsibilities. For some, these responsibilities resulted from formal job expectations, as in Emma's narrative of her work as Language Arts Coordinator, while others performed informal leadership responsibilities based on an administrator's or teacher's need or request. These narratives conveyed participants' interest in teaching and student achievement and the ways they used leadership opportunities to support and enhance those interests, for themselves, their colleagues, and their students.

Reading specialists in this trope performed a range of “formal” leadership responsibilities, among them mentoring new teachers, facilitating grade level meetings or curriculum work, committee membership at the building or district level, assessment administration and coordination, and providing professional development. In addition, they performed “informal” leadership tasks such as providing support to colleagues in the classroom in the form of modeling, observing and providing feedback or as a resource, mediating between colleagues and/or colleagues and administrators, and communicating with parents about literacy programs.

Chapter Five, “Finding a Niche,” focused on narratives describing the ways participants in this trope made choices that enabled them to settle into their work. They sought ways to accommodate personal needs or desires as they fulfilled the requirements of their work situations. Paul’s narrative described the changes and choices he made to blend his teaching and coaching. Others in this trope suspended careers to be with family or moved into a reading specialist role when other teaching opportunities proved unsatisfactory.

Participants in this trope focused primarily on teaching yet their narratives reflected the ways they were called upon to serve as resources to colleagues and to administer assessments, at times providing informal leadership within their buildings. Narratives described participants’ processes for meeting the demands of their personal and professional lives, their understandings of the demands of their job, including the ways their responsibilities compared with those of classroom teachers, concerns from some participants about job security, and their preference for small-group instruction and opportunities to advocate for students that small-group work afforded them.

Chapter Six, “Teaching and Collaboration,” explored narratives in which teaching figured as the key aspect of participants’ work. These narratives described participants’ somewhat negative view of responsibilities, such as SBIT (School-Based Intervention Team) meetings or collaborative meetings with teachers or administrators that took them away from teaching and working with students. Participants in this trope described their work with students as the most important part of their jobs. Moreover, half of the reading specialists in this trope served as tutors or adjunct instructors, in addition to their full-time work as reading specialists.

These narratives illustrated participants’ focus on teaching and work with students yet participants drew on their work with colleagues as they developed their narratives. The narratives provided insight into participants’ work as it was informed by their educational histories, their work in elementary schools, and by political, social, and cultural structures. For some, collaboration emerged as a support to teaching and student achievement while others found their collegial relationships to be a source of tension and conflict. Erica’s narrative was especially illustrative of this tension, which she attributed to a general misinterpretation of the reading specialist’s role. Narratives in this trope focused on teaching, classroom teachers’ understanding/lack of understanding of reading specialists’ work responsibilities, administrative lack of specificity about reading specialists’ roles, and participants’ work with classroom teacher colleagues.

The narratives shared by participants in this study were grouped into one of three tropes in order to capture how their attention was focused on the complexities of one or another of the roles they performed in schools. Specifically, the three tropes focused on how reading specialist participants narrated their stories to describe serving in leadership roles, making symbiotic career and life choices, and teaching and working with students and teacher colleagues.

## DISCUSSION

The reading specialists' narratives described their work, specifically their responsibilities for instruction, assessment, resource to teachers, and leadership as seen through historical, institutional, and social lenses. Their narratives focused on one or another of the aforementioned roles (Bean et al., 2015) yet each narrative reflected a nuanced embodiment of those roles, shaped by educational policy, their institutions, and the social milieu in which they worked. Reading specialists have functioned in schools for over a century and researchers have studied their work, yet participants in this study shared little awareness of these historical underpinnings. Participant narratives described reading specialists' work in their particular institutions providing instruction for students, support for classroom teachers and administrators, and leadership for the schoolwide reading program. Some narratives described awareness of the ways their work was shaped by sociocultural influences, including interpersonal relationships, gender, race, and class to a degree, yet these influences were left uninterrogated by most participants.

Participant narratives described the varied educational backgrounds and life experiences that preceded, and in some cases led them, to their work as reading specialists. Many participants began post-secondary studies with elementary education as their goal while a few others chose education later in their undergraduate studies. Another group of participants studied education in combination with content area studies such as English or music. Several participants viewed classroom teaching as the realization of a life-long dream or goal, yet the reading specialist position did not hold the same attraction. In fact, no participant in this study deliberately sought out this position. Although many participants reportedly felt a bit hesitant about working as a reading specialist, all participants chose to remain in that role.

Most participants met expectations for reading specialists, as established by The International Reading Association's, "What Do Reading Specialists Do? Results From a National Survey," (2002). The IRA determined that these professionals should have master's degrees and experience as classroom teachers at a minimum. Most participants in this study met these criteria, having undergraduate experience in education fields, master's degrees in Reading or Literacy, and some experience in the classroom. A few participants entered the field of education after undergraduate work in other fields and/or employment in areas other than education, or they had fewer than five years' experience as teachers. The IRA's criteria were established to guide higher education as they developed or refined their masters programs and elementary and secondary schools' hiring practices during a time of policy changes that reinforced expectations for students' reading proficiency and the resulting perceived need for qualified reading specialists.

The guidance set forth by the International Reading Association provided specific criteria for graduate studies programming and for schools hiring reading specialists, yet provided no guidelines for schools in determining the day-to-day responsibilities or expectations for reading specialists' work. Participant narratives described a lack of detail or definition to their expectations and responsibilities as reading specialists. This lack left their work undefined and sometimes ambiguous (Bean et al., 2015; Quatroche, Bean, & Hamilton, 2001; Bean & Wilson, 1981), and it forced participants to seek other means of understanding their roles—from colleagues, fellow reading specialists, or by creating their own set of criteria and expectations as they went through their daily tasks. Participants credited colleagues and other reading specialists for a form of mentorship that aided these new reading specialists in giving definition to their work. This work developed a level of complexity in its tendency to take on multiple facets that

varied and morphed, based upon the vagaries of the schools that employed these individuals. This complexity derived from the failure to clearly define the work for those whose responsibility it was to enact this role, provide instruction for students, support for teachers, and leadership for the schoolwide reading program.

Participants served in elementary schools whose educational policies and initiatives were governed by local, state and federal agencies. Schools held the responsibility for operationalizing those policies or initiatives, thus, these same directives informed reading specialists' roles. Participant narratives reflected awareness of achievement testing, and individuals shared opinions ranging from approval to acceptance to resistance about the state's achievement testing protocols, yet few showed awareness of historical policies that shaped their work. Some participants spoke of current initiatives such as Response to Intervention (RTI) or Academic Intervention Services (AIS), because these program names and accompanying acronyms were used to identify their work (e.g., RTI or AIS teacher). They understood that a student's reading proficiency and academic achievement helped determine that student's inclusion in RTI or AIS, but they did not query the origins of these initiatives.

Schools have employed reading specialists to provide reading instruction for students experiencing difficulty with reading for over a century (Barry, 1994), especially in response to federal initiatives that created the need for programs such as Chapter 1/Title 1 (U.S. Congress, 1965; Allington, 1994; Bean, Trovato, & Hamilton, 1995), Reading First (U.S. Congress, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2014) and RTI (U.S. Department of Education, 2009; 2015; Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). Reading specialists served in multiple roles to improve reading instruction (Anderson, 1968; Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003) and the schoolwide reading programs, in response to these initiatives. Participant narratives reflected perspectives that grew out of these

earlier times, with similar responsibilities for instruction and leadership, though no two participants enacted the same responsibilities. This finding was supported by Rita Bean's research from the late 1970s, indicating that the type of program, the expectations of the school's administration, and the qualifications of the reading specialist contributed to each reading specialists' role in a particular building (Bean, 1979). These factors also informed each reading specialists' specific enactments of their work, just as reading specialists have continued to perform the same four key roles in schools for over a century.

Participant narratives reflected a multiplicity of role enactments, each of which included aspects of instruction, assessment, resource to teachers, and leadership. These four roles consistently represented reading specialists' work in the literature (Bean, 1979; Quatroche, Bean, & Hamilton, 2001; Bean et al., 2015) and formed the central idea around which participant narratives revolved. Reading specialists worked directly with students to deliver instruction and they conducted various forms of assessment in the course of their work in schools. They served as a resource to teachers to support their classroom instruction and the schoolwide reading program. Participants served as leaders in formally identified roles, or informally, based upon the needs and expectations of teachers and administrators with whom they worked.

Reading specialists served in schools as providers of supplemental instruction, in addition to the instruction students received from their classroom teachers. The reading specialists' work with students who experienced difficulty with reading supported classroom teachers' efforts, and in the best circumstances, aligned with classroom instruction (McGill-Franzen, 1989; Johnston & Allington, 1991). The demand for congruence between classroom and supplementary (remedial) instruction initiated a review of delivery methods for supplemental reading under *The Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Johnston and



Allington (1991) recommended a shift from the typical pull-out model of instruction to a push-in model, enabling greater congruency, and ultimately greater clarity, of instruction. Participants in this study employed a range of instructional methods, from pull-out to push-in and a combination of both.

Participant narratives suggested a perceived need or expectation, on the part of classroom teachers, that reading specialists should defer to them with respect to instructional models. While some of these decisions were made as a result of collaboration and shared decision-making, some participants' instructional model was determined according to the classroom teacher's preference. Participants did not expand upon these experiences, beyond making reference to them, nor did they comment upon their perception or their students' perceptions of the occurrence. Whether they were reluctant to comment further or were unaware of (and therefore complicit in) disregarding the potential impact upon students' learning is uncertain.

Participant narratives included vignettes that described a complex set of responsibilities for instruction, assessment, support for teachers and leadership. These responsibilities are similar to those reported by Bean, Swan, & Knaub (2003) in their survey of reading specialists and principals. Additionally, participants in this study were also responsible for leadership, curriculum development and coordination of the reading program, three aspects of reading specialists' work valued by principals in the survey conducted by Bean and her colleagues. Participant narratives reflected a somewhat fluid enactment of these components, such that what others might perceive as different responsibilities, these participants perceived as aspects of the gestalt of their work. Most participants in this study did not receive clearly delineated job requirements when they began their work as reading specialists, indeed, many of them gained understanding of the role as they fulfilled the day-to-day responsibilities that arose as they

worked with students and teacher-colleagues. Participants constructed their narratives in response to the questions posed to them, yet they also chose to elaborate on some aspects of their work over others. These lengthy stories provided participants a space to fashion the narrative of their work in ways that helped them make sense of their own experiences as reading specialists as any storyteller uses the narrative process to make sense of her/his own world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2007).

Participant narratives described assessment as an ongoing piece of their rather complex responsibilities. As suggested by the survey of principals mentioned above, reading specialists held responsibility for assessment, and for diagnosis of reading difficulties. Participants conducted assessments throughout the year and many reading specialists held responsibility for collecting, analyzing, and reporting assessment results. New students were assessed, in an endeavor to screen for reading difficulties that might suggest a need for specialized reading. Many reading programs included ongoing, formative assessment as one component of the program, thus reading specialists took some responsibility for administration and subsequent data management for these assessments. Some participants coordinated administration of the annual state-wide reading assessment while all participants shared in administration of these assessments in their buildings.

Leadership responsibilities formed a key aspect of most reading specialists' responsibilities and many narratives were infused throughout with shades of its importance in their work. Beginning with the Goals 2000 initiative (U.S. 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 1993-1994), teachers were called upon to take greater authority and responsibility for student learning (McGill-Franzen, 2000). *Teaching All Children to Read: The Roles of the Reading Specialist* (International Reading Association, 2000), a statement from the International Reading

Association, positioned reading specialists as particularly qualified and able to enact these leadership roles. During this time of changing demands for student proficiency, and the accompanying testing these demands ushered in, some reading specialists embarked on a new aspect of leadership, that of the reading (or literacy) coach. Participants in this study did not enact the coaching role, yet, like coaches, a number of them met expectations for mentoring or supporting classroom teachers and leadership of the schoolwide reading program.

Participants in this study valued opportunities for their own professional development, collaboration with other reading specialists in networks, or informal gatherings, and continuous learning or “keeping up in the field.” Continued access to professional development supported participants’ focus on the important work of providing instruction, leadership, and support for teachers. Similarly, reading specialists in multiple studies conducted since 2001, deemed teaching and collaboration with colleagues as the critical aspects of their work while administrators viewed leadership and mentoring as reading specialists’ key roles (Galloway & Lesaux, 2014). Leadership took many forms for participants in this study; some perceived it as a primary focus for their work while others took on a leadership role temporarily or situationally. Some participants’ narratives reflected discomfort with or uncertainty about certain aspects of their work, especially key leadership roles for the reading program, curriculum development, and expectations for coaching classroom teachers. These participants shared feelings of unpreparedness for expected roles like those of reading specialists’ in the study conducted by Bean, Swan & Knaub (2003) described earlier. Recently, Rita Bean and her colleagues (2015) also suggested that all reading specialists performed a leadership role in some aspect of their work. In their view, this included such informal leadership tasks as instructional planning to more formalized leadership for the reading program.

Reading specialists working in elementary schools enacted multiple roles as teachers, leaders, and colleagues. These roles were initially fashioned over time, with the identity each individual constructed during the process of becoming a teacher (Assaf, 2016). Researchers in the field of literacy described various influences shaping the work of reading specialists, while participant narratives described how their own life-events and work experiences shaped their work. Sociocultural influences—especially gender, race, and class—from which identity draws deeply yet often invisibly, were mostly uninterrogated by participants in this study.

Reading specialists in this study, like the majority of reading specialists in elementary schools, were mostly White women (Carter, 2007; Tallerico, 2007; Galman & Mallozzi, 2012). That elementary teaching is primarily the realm of women has devalued and feminized this work (Warin & Gannerud, 2014). It has been linked to nurturing and caring for children in ways that replicate gendered notions of women in child rearing roles. This gendered view of caring and teaching as the purview of women, who are often White, replicates and reinforces racial, hegemonic normalization of the White teacher (Thompson, 1998). The White teacher provided a normative identity against which prospective teachers might view their own identity markers. Those who identify within the norm of White female, and see this norm replicated in teacher colleagues, may fail to question the image of White female teachers, thus enacting a colorblind, racially, and culturally naïve attitude.

Participants in this study worked in elementary schools where their identity was unmarked because it was normalized (Schick, 2000; Collins, 1998). Most of these reading specialists worked in rural or suburban schools whose populations were not culturally or racially diverse, thus replicating hegemonic structures. A few participants acknowledged gender, the prevalence of White female elementary teachers, and the feminization of that role as a frequently

occurring phenomenon. Although they acknowledged these biases, participants generally failed to question the norm or to challenge the lack of racial diversity in elementary schools. The tendency of these reading specialists to see Whiteness as normalized, and their failure to see Whiteness as a marker of race entrenched them in the stereotyped that marginalized members of non-dominant cultures. Race as an identity marker, when perceived in this manner, was applied only to “others” and not to those members of the normalized White culture.

While the gendered nature of elementary teaching was discussed, it was not challenged, nor was it associated with uneven power distributions or the marginalization of women to traditional nurturing roles (Galloway & Lesaux, 2014; Mallozzi & Galman, 2014). Participants were almost completely silent about race and the absence of people of color in their schools. Their failure to interrogate or to challenge the normalized image of the White teacher exemplified their complicity in perpetuating existing norms.

The notion of students’ reading deficiency and the need for remedial reading were oftentimes linked to socioeconomic status and to assumptions of one’s cultural background suggesting one’s readiness for traditional forms of learning (McGill-Franzen, 2000; Alvermann, 2003). The deficit model, and its tendency to marginalize those whom it identified, was another stereotypic norm that participants did not challenge. Rather, their narratives suggested that their instructional foci could be described as remediation and prevention (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Participants were well-meaning and their narratives illustrated their concern for their students academic and social/emotional wellbeing. At the same time, instructional practices reinforced deficit thinking, exemplified by an expectation that reading specialists were to remediate, or “fix,” their students. Participant narratives indicated their desire to connect with students and to help them become more confident readers but their pedagogy remained

entrenched in a remediation rather than a re/mediation mindset (Cole & Griffin, 1983; Alvermann, 2003).

Some reading specialists reported working in Kindergarten classrooms to support students' early literacy skill development. Others who pushed into classrooms supported all students in their growth as literate individuals, although they often provided additional support for those who experienced difficulty with reading skills or comprehension. Federal initiatives, such as Reading First (U.S. Department of Education, 2014) and Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) led to the implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) and Academic Intervention Services (AIS) to support specialized reading instruction, or additional instruction in academic subjects for students whose academic proficiency was below cut points established by the state education department. Reading specialists figured among educators whose literacy focus and qualifications identified their suitability to provide these levels of support for students (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012).

Participants described the qualities or characteristics desirable in a “good” reading specialist. They believed reading specialists should embody the traits of flexibility, humor, reliability, and diplomacy. As leaders and in their work with students and teachers, reading specialists with good listening skills and an ability to build trusting relationships were considered “good.” Participants frequently listed these qualities or competencies (Galloway & Lesaux, 2014) as highly beneficial to reading specialists' work and their interactions with others. Similarly, Bean and her colleagues (2015) observed that building trust, having a sense of humor, and collaborating with others as co-learners were valuable characteristics, as identified through their study. Additionally, participants in this study thought reading specialists should be highly

organized yet open to change and interruption, be willing to work in various settings (e.g., closets or small spaces), and be able to get along with people.

### **Limitations**

As I noted in Chapter Three, Method, this study was limited to my interpretation of data gathered through interviews with elementary reading specialists working in New York State. Though the interviews rendered rich narratives, their scope captured similar stories in that all participants shared a common set of roles and responsibilities, thus they viewed their work through somewhat similar lenses. Because all participants served in New York State, they followed the same guidelines for certification and were expected to meet similar performance standards, thus increasing the likelihood of similar roles and responsibilities in their work. The gathering of these data through recommendations and snowball sampling limited the pool of potential participants to White women teaching in rural or suburban schools. At the same time, the preponderance of White female participants in this study mirrors current gender and racial trends in elementary schools. Future narrative studies of this type might be enriched by the inclusion of multiple voices and diverse perspectives.

Reading specialists participating in this study shared narratives of their work including stories of their interactions with colleagues and administrators. These narratives conveyed reading specialists' perspectives and gave voice to their stories as they chose to tell them, yet those individuals whom the narratives referenced had no voice in these stories. This study is limited in the scope of narrative perspectives because it failed to capture classroom teachers and administrator's views toward the work of reading specialists in their schools. Similarly, participants shared narratives that responded, in the main, to my interview questions. These questions tended to direct participants' responses toward certain aspects of their work in ways

that established boundaries and thus were limiting. Furthermore, participant narratives passed through my own interpretive lens, which shaped the manner in which these narratives were presented. As part of my interpretation and analysis of these data, my assignment of participant narratives to a single trope called attention to the differences between narratives or groups of narratives rather than illustrating both the strength of the similarities as well as the range of experiences as related through participant narratives. By using tropes and grouping narratives within one of the tropes, I was able to organize my data to foreground specific aspects of this work that were common to participants, yet this also limited my ability to display those aspects of their work that were common across most, if not all, participants.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study focused on interviews with reading specialists to elicit their narratives about their work. Its scope was concentrated on the institutional level yet current research and scholarship in the area of social design suggests a broader focus intent on social change for equity (Gutierrez & Jurow, 2016). Social design research creates spaces for individuals to connect with their social and cultural history to realize their identity as historical actors, embodying the knowledge of the past as it informs the present. As historical actors, individuals use knowledge of the past and the present in combination with future-oriented action to effect social change. This work has implications for students to feel empowered as learners because it situates individuals as change agents. Research in the area of re/mediation (Cole & Griffin, 1983; Alvermann, 2003) presents similar opportunities for teachers to engage students in learning experiences that they find empowering and that build their self-efficacy as literate members of society. Reading specialists serve many students experiencing reading difficulties, lower academic achievement, and are thus marginalized in classrooms. Reading specialists can



build strong relationships with their students and provide equitable learning opportunities where students to use their own social and cultural history, build confidence and self-efficacy, and develop as literate citizens.

This study of reading specialists' narratives about their work shows areas for growth among reading specialists and classroom teachers in teaching for equity and for social change. Future research might engage reading specialists as catalysts for re/mediation instruction in schools. Engaging students in texts and providing learning opportunities for students to collaborate, with support from reading specialists could bring about significant change in reading/literacy proficiency and in the direction of reading specialists' work.

Future research may provide additional insight into the roles of reading specialists and the influences that shape those roles by developing an observation tool to be used by school leaders. This tool would enable school leaders to capture the variety of roles and responsibilities reading specialists take on in schools. In conjunction with the existing literature on reading specialists, such new research will enable prospective reading specialists to understand the expectations and demands of the job. Additionally, teacher preparation programs and school leaders may prepare and engage reading specialists who possess the content knowledge, pedagogy, and awareness to fulfill the complex responsibilities of the job.

### **Implications for School Districts and School Leaders**

District and school leaders provide mentors for new classroom teachers. New reading specialists could be placed with more senior reading specialist mentors affording new reading specialists opportunity to gain familiarity with the school in general and with the reading specialist role in particular. Should a school have only one reading specialist, buildings within a

district or smaller districts might place new reading specialists with a classroom teacher and coordinate to share a reading specialist mentor, in addition to the building-level mentor.

School administrators share their vision for their district/buildings, and help to shape the culture within which educators work. Teachers understand their roles, and the roles of colleagues, through their own perceptions, yet administrators contribute to an understanding of teachers' roles within a building. Reading specialists' roles are often undefined, and therefore, misunderstood by classroom teachers and, at times, by reading specialists who are unfamiliar with the job. Administrators could work with reading specialists to clearly identify the roles and responsibilities of these staff members, and subsequently, provide clarity for the entire teaching staff about the reading specialists' role.

Many people in this study collaborated with classroom teachers and administrators in fulfillment of their responsibilities. Reading specialists who possess strong skills for listening, open-ended questioning, and a non-judgmental focus on the needs and agenda of colleagues and students are an asset to a school/district. Individual reading specialists may possess such skills naturally, yet all reading specialists serving in a coaching or coach-like capacity would benefit from targeted professional development to maximize these interpersonal skills. Administrators could foster relationships between reading specialists and other staff members through collaborative conversations and classroom collaborations, thus building a strong team of teachers who maximize the instructional potential of the teaching teams within their buildings. How might school leaders support reading specialists to meet the needs and expectations of students, teacher colleagues, parents, and administration? How might collaboration between teacher educators and school leaders prove mutually beneficial to colleges, K-12 education, reading specialists, and students?

## **Implications for Teacher Education**

Reading specialists enter the field with varying degrees of readiness for the work they undertake, including their readiness to work with students of color. Masters programs in Literacy are filled with many White women who will serve as teachers and reading specialists in schools whose populations hail from countries outside the U.S. and students of color. In either case, cultural differences exist and many reading specialists do not possess the knowledge of cultures outside their own. Indeed, many White individuals fail to question their own subjectivities regarding race, gender, and class. In this study, most participants failed to question their own subjectivities. Literacy teacher education programs could help to develop future reading specialists' awareness of White bias by exploring White cultural norms and their entrenched standards. Issues of gender, sexuality, and other marginalizing influences could be included in these programs.

To address these needs for cultural equity and social justice, some teacher education programs have developed curricula incorporating self-reflection strategies like Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Rogers & Wetzel, 2014; Wetzel & Rogers, 2015). Undergraduates and graduate students in these programs reflect upon their own subjectivities and employ CDA in their field experiences as they select materials, create lessons, and work with students. Inclusion of CDA instruction and learning experiences in literacy preparation courses could empower future literacy specialists as leaders for social justice and equity in their work with students and in their collaborations with colleagues and administrators. Such curricula may facilitate students' deconstruction of normalizing hegemonic structures, especially those that perpetuate existing racial stereotypes.

Current survey research of reading specialists and coaches identified their desire for preparation as leaders and for opportunities to observe coaches and be mentored as they developed coaching skills (Bean et al., 2015). The International Literacy Association's expectations for master's programs include developing students' knowledge, skills, and dispositions as coaches (ILA, 2010). Teacher education programs could meet the needs expressed by reading specialists for preparation as coaches as part of the literacy master's program, thus equipping prospective reading/literacy specialists with valuable coaching skills. Alternatively, reading specialists could receive coaching preparation, through ongoing professional development that included a cycle of observation, practice, and feedback. This preparation model would enable reading/literacy specialists to incorporate their developing skills as part of their practice. The work of reading specialists is complex in its multiple roles and responsibilities. How might preparation programs build understanding and increase clarity about the foundations of reading specialists' work and prepare individuals who are able to engage in the types of problem-solving that are needed in this complex work.

## **Conclusion**

Reading specialists in elementary schools negotiate multiple roles to serve as instructional leaders, specialized reading teachers, and resources to classroom teachers. These roles are nuanced in that a reading specialist must be able to shift between these roles to meet the needs of students, teachers, and administrators. Reading specialists serving in these schools have responsibilities to meet district expectations to support the reading program, and meet the demands of state and federal policies and regulations. While these district expectations and governmental demands are relatively similar, the ways reading specialists enact their roles and responsibilities in response are highly contextualized to the settings in which they work. Within

these contextualized settings, reading specialists construct an identity, shaped in part by the roles they enact and by the historical, institutional, and sociocultural forces they encounter.

In previous times to the present, elementary schools have been staffed with White women, primarily. The patriarchal structures of the past continue to foster a normalized image of the elementary teacher as a White middle-class woman. This study suggests that this image continues to perpetuate itself in the schools of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in suburban and rural schools where White teachers and children continue to form a majority, and Whiteness remains uninterrogated. Teacher education programs, literacy master's programs, and professional development may provide a means by which race and color/colorblindness, as well as other identity markers, can be interrupted and interrogated. Disruption of the image of teacher as White female and the hegemony this image entails could initiate new ways of constructing teacher/reading specialist identity.

Reading specialists' roles in elementary schools are often complicated as they attend to multiple demands and responsibilities from federal and local policies and initiative and the needs and expectations of administrators, teachers, and students. New York State, the state in which this study took place, has no mandate for the position, yet many schools have continued to employ teachers in this position to provide instruction and leadership. This suggests that, despite the complexities and ambiguities of the position, reading specialists are needed in elementary schools because they possess the knowledge of reading content and pedagogy to guide literacy instruction for students. The more we can help them understand the workings of the position—its complexity, variety, and messiness rather than the somewhat static roles that have described the work of reading specialists—and learn from the collaborative relationships they develop with

students, teachers, and administrators, the more they will be able to lead schoolwide literacy initiatives and to help realize a vision for equitable learning experiences for all students.

## Appendix

**Table 1**

### Participants

Participant Name (Pseudonym)	Years Teaching	Years as Reading Specialist	School Classification	Age (range)	Undergraduate concentration	Race/ethnicity	Gender
Emma* In-person	21	21	Suburban	35-50	Psychology/ Sociology	White	F
Erica* In-person	25+	18	Suburban	50+	Elem. Ed	African-Amer.	F
Paul* In-person	5	3	Rural	20-35	Elem. Ed	White	M
Susan In-person	20+	20+	All	50+	Psychology	White	F
Marie Phone	20+	20+	Suburban	35-50	Elem. Ed	White	F
Lynn In-person	30+	30+	Rural	50+	Elem. Ed	White	F
Cheryl In-person	20+	10	Suburban	35-50	Elem. Ed	White	F
Liz Phone	10	5	Urban	50+	English Ed	White	F
Camille In-person	18	2	Urban	35-50	English Ed	White	F
Katie In-person	25+	17	All	50+	Elem. Ed	White	F
Anna In-person	10	4	All	35-50	Elem. Ed	White	F
Virginia In-person	20+	16	Rural	50+	Elem. Ed	White	F
Deb In-person	15+	4	Rural	35-50	Elem. Ed	White	F
Katherine In-person	15+	8	Rural	35-50	Music Ed	White	F
Nancy In-person	15+	12	Suburban	35-50	English Ed	White	F
Bridget In-person	28	14	Suburban	35-50	Elem. Ed	White	F
Sarah In-person	3	1	Suburban	20-30	English Ed	White	F
Barb In-person	8	1	Rural	35-50	Elem.Ed/ Theater	White	F

**Table 1****Participants**

Participant Name (Pseudonym)	Years Teaching	Years as Reading Specialist	School Classification	Age (range)	Undergraduate Concentration	Race/ethnicity	Gender
Monica In-person	10+	2	Suburban	35-50	Elem. Ed/ Spec. Ed	White	F
Stephanie In-person	6	5	Suburban	20-35	Elem. Ed	White	F
Peggy In-person	3	3	Urban (private)	35-50	Elem. Ed	White	F
Julie Phone	2	2	Rural	20-35	Elem. Ed	White	F



**Table 2****Interview Questions**

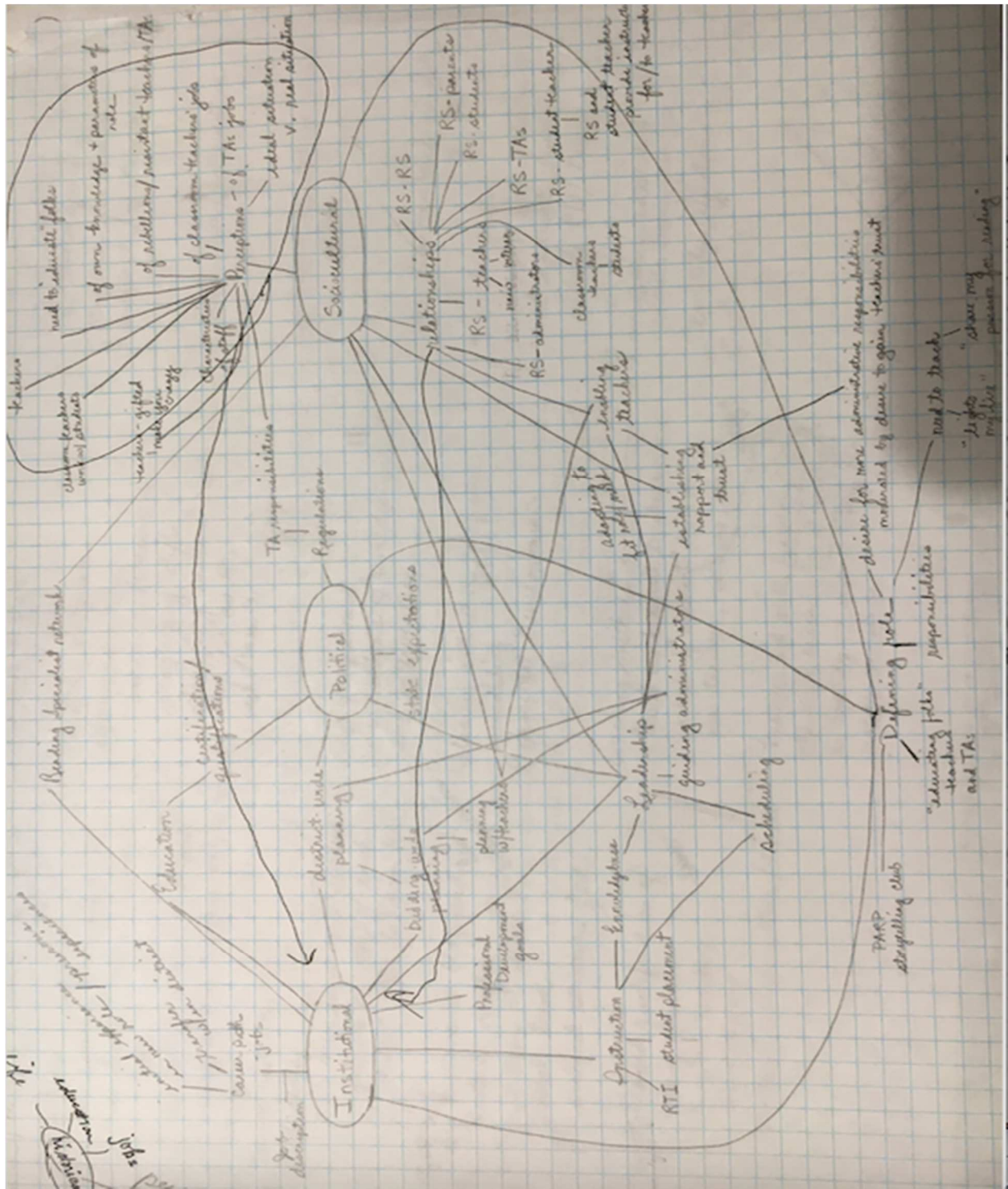
1. Background information: Tell me about your education and any teaching experiences you've had prior to working as a reading specialist.
2. Tell me about your work as a reading specialist.
3. How would you describe your school/district demographics?
4. Is the school considered urban, suburban or rural?
5. Tell me about your work with students.
  - a. These follow-up questions were asked if they were not included in the response:
    - i. What grade levels do you work with?
    - ii. Do you push-in to classrooms or pull-out groups of students?
    - iii. How many students do you work with?
6. Tell me about what a typical day looks like.
7. How do your days differ—what responsibilities cause them to differ?
8. On what committees do you serve? How often do they meet?
9. What would you change about your job?
10. Tell me about your work with students.
11. Tell me about your work with teachers (and administrators).
12. What are the characteristics of a “good” reading specialist?
13. What do you feel confident about knowing when you're teaching reading?
14. What would you like to know more about?
15. What were the expectations for the position when you were first hired?

**Table 2 (continued)****Interview Questions**

16. (If there was no defined set of expectations)—How did you determine your responsibilities?
17. Why do you think there are mostly women/White women working as elementary reading specialists?
18. What politics or policies are involved with your work?

Table 3

Coding Matrix



**Table 4****Julie's Schedule:**

Time	Grade level	Instructional focus/Responsibility
8:00-8:30		Planning period
8:30-9:00	Students arrive at school	Testing block/meet with teachers/score assessment or running records
9:00-10:00	2 <sup>nd</sup> grade (two groups)	Pull-out
10:00-10:30	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	Push-in/pull aside in classroom
10:30-11:00	1 <sup>st</sup> grade (two groups)	Push-in/pull aside in classroom
11:00-11:30	4 <sup>th</sup> grade	Push-in (group will be split in two due to number of students increasing)
11:30-12:00	Kindergarten	
12:00-12:30		Travel between buildings
12:30-1:00		Lunch
1:00-1:20	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	
1:20-1:40	6 <sup>th</sup> grade	
1:45-2:10	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	Students in these groups come from different classes or they meet with Julie to address different needs.
2:15-2:30	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	
2:30-3:00	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	
3:00-3:15		After school planning and preparation for the next day's lessons.

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K. Weiler, (Eds.), *Telling women's lives: Narrative inquiries in the history of women's education* (pp. 44-59). Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

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## Wendy Woods Bunker

### Educational Experience

- Fall 2003- present      Syracuse University  
Ph.D. Literacy Education, anticipated Summer 2017
- 1991-1994                State University College at Cortland  
Master of Science Reading Education K-12, Permanent Certification
- 1979-1982                State University College at Potsdam  
Bachelor of Arts English/Secondary Education, 7-12, Permanent  
Certification

### Professional Experience

- March 2014-  
Present                    Literacy Curriculum Specialist, Oneida Board of Cooperative  
Educational Services (OHM BOCES), New Hartford, New York
- Fall 2016                    Instructor, LIT 528 Literacy and Language Development,  
Mohawk Valley Community College Satellite Campus of the  
State University at Cortland, Cortland, NY.
- Fall 2010-2014            Reading Specialist/English Teacher, Waterville Central School District,  
Waterville, New York
- Fall 2009-  
Spring 2010                Assistant Professor, Mount St. Mary's University, Emmitsburg,  
Maryland
- Fall 2006-  
Spring 2009                Reading First Coordinator for Remsen Elementary School,  
Remsen, New York; administration of Reading First grant implementation  
and funding, classroom observation and professional development
- Spring 2006                Clinician, RED 629 Advanced Literacy Interventions  
Syracuse University: based at Roberts Elementary School, Syracuse, New  
York
- Fall 2005                    Instructor, RED 624 Reading Methods and Materials,  
Syracuse University
- Spring 2005                Instructor, RED 629 Advanced Literacy Interventions,  
Syracuse University: based at Roberts Elementary School, Syracuse,  
New York
- Spring 2004                Clinician, RED 626 Advanced Literacy Interventions

Syracuse University: based at Roberts Elementary School, Syracuse, New York

- Fall 2004                      Instructor, RED 625 Language Arts Methods and Materials, Syracuse University
- Fall 2003-  
Spring 2006                      Observation facilitator/coordinator, Syracuse University  
Early Literacy Research Project with Benita A. Blachman, Ph.D.
- Sept. 1995-  
June 2003                      Reading Specialist, Grades 1-12 Oriskany School District  
Oriskany, New York
- Fall-  
Spring 2003                      Facilitated professional development for Reading Specialists-Oneida  
BOCES New Hartford, New York
- Summer 2002                      New York State English Language Arts Assessment test item reviewer,  
Albany, New York

## II. Research

### Publications

- Bunker, W.                      *Working as Elementary Reading Specialists: A Narrative Inquiry.*  
Dissertation in progress.

### Professional Presentations

- Bunker, W. (2012, December). *Working as Elementary Reading Specialists: A Narrative Analysis.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Literacy Researchers Association, San Diego, CA.
- Bunker, W. (2012, August). *An overview of Road to Reading and Road to the Code.* Presented as a professional development workshop at Westmoreland Elementary School, Westmoreland, New York.
- Bunker, W. (2011, August). *Using data to inform instruction.* Presented as a professional development workshop at Westmoreland Elementary School, Westmoreland, New York.
- Bunker, W. (2009, December). *Narratives of collaboration and negotiation: Reading specialists' perspectives toward their work.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, Albuquerque, NM.
- Bunker, W. (2008, December). *Reading specialists' perspectives toward their work.* Round table presented at the annual meeting of the National Reading

Conference, Orlando, FL.

Bunker, W. & Bailey, K. (2007, November). *Where's the instruction manual: Exploring the crossroads of Reading First implementation and school climate*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, Austin, TX.

Brown, R. & Bunker, W. (2005, November). *Collaborating in cyberspace: Listserv participation that scaffolds the professional development of strategies-based teachers of comprehension*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, Miami, FL.

Bunker, W. (2005, November). *Professional development: On-line, on-target and on-going*. Presented at the annual meeting of the New York State Reading Association, Rochester, NY.

Bunker, W. (2004, July). *Teaching comprehension in middle school: Book study group*. Presented as a professional development workshop at Donovan Middle School, Utica, NY.

Bunker, W. (2004, November). *Reading specialists and No Child Left Behind: Developing leadership roles*. Presented at the annual meeting of the New York State Reading Association, Saratoga, NY.

Bunker, W. (2004, April). *An introduction to running records*. Presented as a professional development workshop at Jamesville-Dewitt Elementary and Jamesville-Dewitt High School, Syracuse, New York.

Bunker, W. (2003, October). *Comprehension strategies that work*. Presented as a professional development workshop at Oneida Board of Cooperative Education Services, New Hartford, New York

Bunker, W. & Luckey, C. (2002, June). *Four blocks*. Presented as a professional development workshop at Oriskany Central School, Oriskany, New York

### **III. Service**

#### **Committees**

2012-2013            Common Core Curriculum Ambassadors, Waterville Central School/Oneida-Herkimer-Madison BOCES.

2012-2013            Focus Schools Advisory Committee, Waterville Central School

2009-2010            President's Advisory Council, Mount St. Mary's University

2005-2008	Student Organization of Literacy Educators and Researchers (SOLER) Vice-President
2005-2006	Reading and Language Arts Department student representative-School of Education Assembly, Syracuse University
2003-2004	Graduate representative-Promotion and Tenure Committee, School of Education, Syracuse University
2000-2003	Center State Teacher Center Policy Board
2002-2003	Oneida BOCES Committee for the Development of Grade Level Assessments
1995-2003	Language Arts committee co-chair, Oriskany School District
1999-2003	Table facilitator/scorer for New York State English Language Arts assessment, grades 4 and 8

*Recognitions/Awards*

Winter 2013	Invited to represent Oneida-Herkimer-Madison BOCES at Gates Foundation 2 <sup>nd</sup> Annual Elevating and Celebrating Effective Teachers and Teaching Conference, San Diego, CA
2005-2006	Graduate Assistant Syracuse University
2004-2005	Graduate Assistant Syracuse University
Fall 2005	Sheldon Fellowship Award: academic award for outstanding work as a graduate assistant, \$3100.00
2003-2004	Graduate Assistant Syracuse University