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Shelley B. Wepner  
*Manhattanville College*

Diana J. Quatroche  
*Indiana State University*

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## **How Are Colleges and Universities Preparing Reading Specialist Candidates for Leadership Positions in the Schools?**

**Shelley B. Wepner, Ed.D.**  
Manhattanville College, Purchase, NY

**Diana J. Quatroche, Ph.D.**  
Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN

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### **Abstract**

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This article reports on the results of 11 interviews conducted as a follow-up to a survey that examined the perceptions of university faculty regarding the importance of graduate programs preparing reading specialists for leadership roles. The results of the interviews indicate that programs require a leadership course that has reading specialist candidates actually working with classroom teachers in a school setting. These programs also require that reading specialist candidates provide professional development and develop skills in communication and collaboration. We suggest that the surveyed programs provide a model of what could be offered in master's degree/certification programs for reading specialists.

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### **The Literacy Specialist**

There is now widespread recognition that reading specialists are expected to serve as leaders of literacy for teachers, schools, and communities because they have been given responsibility for the literacy performance of readers in general and struggling readers in particular (Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003; International Reading Association, 2010). The ever-evolving role of the literacy coach has also contributed to an appreciation of the knowledge and skills that reading specialists should bring to their position (Blachowicz, Obrochta, & Fogelberg, 2005; Blachowicz et al., 2010;

Hall, 2004; Israel, 2005; Walpole & Blamey, 2008). In many instances, literacy coaches have been hired to provide professional development and support to classroom teachers to improve classroom instruction; serve as a resource to paraprofessionals, administrators, and the community; and provide professional development for the entire school community. In other words, literacy coaches are expected to serve as *leaders* of a school's reading program.

Depending on state guidelines for licensure, these literacy coaches are coming from the classroom or are brought from the traditional reading specialist role (L'Allier, Elish-Piper, & Bean, 2010; Shaw, Smith, Chesler, & Romeo, 2005). When literacy coaches come from the classroom, they are not necessarily trained as reading specialists, and do not necessarily have any graduate preparation in reading (IRA Surveys Coaches, 2006; Toll, 2005). This in part is due to the growing need for literacy coaches to help with the Reading First program of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). Reading First aims to enable all children to become successful early readers, with the focus on kindergarten through third grade and a major part of the program involves providing professional development for teachers in using scientifically based reading programs. The goal is then to be able to hold schools and states accountable for students' progress on a variety of assessment tools. In addition, these literacy coaches were used to help with teachers' professional development (Shanklin, 2007). Many assert that ideally, those with graduate degrees in reading should serve as leaders of literacy programs (L'Allier et al., 2010). Consequently, graduate programs in reading should include courses to prepare reading specialists as leaders with coaching responsibilities.

We determined that we needed to find out more about ways graduate programs for reading specialists are preparing their candidates to become leaders as IRA/NCATE standards are now more heavily focused on the leadership/coaching role. However, how these standards are interpreted is at issue because, while some reading specialist programs embed leadership experiences throughout a program, others devote one specific course to leadership practices. To feel equipped to serve in a leadership role, reading specialists need practice in providing leadership, which may or may not be part of a reading specialist program. It is also important to consider whether reading specialist candidates have practiced as leaders in an actual school setting, a university reading clinic setting, or only with peers within a university graduate course.

## **Historical Practices and Current Standards for Reading Professionals**

The role of reading specialists as leaders is not new. In the 1960s and 1970s, when the role developed to address post-Sputnik concerns about literacy in the United States, reading specialists served as resource persons, advisors, and in-service leaders (Robinson & Rauch, 1965; Vogt & Shearer, 2003). A shift in reading specialists' positions occurred in the early 1980s with the advent of changes in Title I when they evolved into functioning primarily as remedial reading teachers. A downward trend in the use of reading specialists as leaders continued until the late 1990s and early 2000s. Studies that were conducted during this period found that reading specialists needed to have responsibility for school-wide literacy improvement for all students (Allington & Walmsley, 1995; Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Shelton, & Wallis, 2002; Long, 1995; Quatroche, Bean, & Hamilton, 2001).

Current standards for reading specialists call for the leadership role because, as Pipes (2004) reports, work with classroom teachers ensures that there is quality "first" teaching. The role of the literacy coach also appears in the current standards for reading professionals (International Reading Association, 2004a) where one of the categories is designated as reading specialist/reading coach. The description of the category lists the following responsibilities for this role: (a) Be a resource to teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and the community; (b) collaborate and work cooperatively with other professionals; (c) provide professional development; and (d) advocate for students.

Each standard within this category includes descriptions that use words such as assist, support, help, communicate, collaborate, and demonstrate. For example, a reading specialist might "collaborate" with the classroom teacher on assessment data and "help" the teacher develop instructional strategies to address student needs. These standards are a reflection of the increasingly important leadership role that reading specialists are assuming (Bean, Knaub, & Swan, 2000), especially as it relates to the improvement of the quality of classroom teaching (Allington & Baker, 1999). These standards are also the result of the 1998 report of the National Research Council which recommended that schools should have access to reading specialists who can address reading difficulties *and* give guidance to classroom teachers (Bean, 2004; Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Frey, 2003; Shaw et al., 2005; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

The standards actually parallel what reading specialists believe their responsibilities are. In a first national survey conducted by Bean, Trovato, and Hamilton

(1995), reading specialists indicated that they performed many different tasks in an instructional role and in a leadership role. In a follow-up national survey (Bean et al., 2002), reading specialists identified similar roles, with most respondents indicating that they actually served as a resource to teachers, often on a daily basis. More than half of the reading specialists from this second survey reported increased pressure to serve as a resource to teachers. Interviews with reading specialists in a later study indicated that reading specialists use their instructional role to provide a pathway to this leadership by gaining access to teachers to discuss both students and the school reading program (Bean et al., 2003).

Acknowledging the importance of the leadership role for reading specialists, research has been conducted on ways to serve as an effective leader. For example, ways in which collaboration can impact teacher practice has been studied (Dole, 2004; Picard, 2005; Woodward & Talbert-Johnson, 2009). Jaeger (1996), who refers to reading specialists as collaborative consultants, identifies specific collaborative responsibilities that involve serving as a resource to teachers and parents, teaching classroom demonstrations, and providing ideas about instructional strategies and ongoing staff development.

Several characteristics have been identified that appear to lead to successful collaboration. These include shared vision, commitment, caring, positive interaction, and power sharing (Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, & Riley, 1997; David & Handler, 2001). Also identified are some of the benefits of successful collaboration such as positive teacher self-perceptions, a heightened sense of efficacy, an improved knowledge base, teacher leadership, and improved learning for students. There is also some evidence that supports the development of collaboration through guided practice (Hudson & Glomb, 1997; Reif & Coulon, 1994).

Guth and Pettengill (2005) provide specific suggestions on ways to promote collaboration as an integral part of the reading program: (a) clear guidelines; (b) discussion of such guidelines; (c) meetings with teams or grade levels to discuss assessment results and use such results to create flexible groups; (d) the development of a reading model that works best for each team; and (e) the reading specialist's maintenance of a flexible schedule to be available for such collaboration.

As the leadership role continues to emerge as a critical component for reading specialists and literacy coaches, more research will become available on exemplary models and conditions for cultivating such a role. In the meantime, and because reading specialists do not necessarily feel prepared to handle these leadership responsibilities (Bean, 2004; Bean et al., 2003; Bean et al., 1995), more needs

to be done to prepare reading specialists and literacy coaches to know how to work with children and at the same time emerge as leaders who work collaboratively with colleagues (Bean et al., 2003).

## **Perceptions and Beliefs of Literacy Educators**

While it seems obvious that teacher education programs should play a pivotal role in preparing reading specialists to serve as leaders or literacy coaches, Shaw et al. (2005) reported that the necessary preparation work of courses and field experiences would require a paradigm shift for graduate reading and literacy programs.

Because we were unaware of any research that identifies what schools, colleges, and Departments of Education are doing with the leadership component of their reading specialist programs, we developed and administered a survey to identify faculty perceptions of the importance of developing reading specialists' leadership skills. We thought that this information would help us determine if institutions are providing adequate preparation for our graduates to succeed as leaders of literacy in their respective schools. We also thought that the results of such a survey would be important for professional associations such as the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) to have as they work with national accrediting bodies (e.g., National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE]) and state departments of education to develop curriculum standards related to the inclusion of leadership components for literacy programs.

## **Description and Findings from the Survey**

Two major questions were addressed in the survey:

1. What aspects of leadership are currently in place in your program to develop reading specialists?
2. What content and experiences should be included in programs to develop reading specialists?

The survey had a 45 percent response rate, with 233 of the 518 surveys returned. Slightly more than half of the respondents, who are professors of reading, indicated that a course in leadership is required in their programs. Yet nearly 70 percent of the respondents believe that such a course should be offered. Sixty-two percent of the respondents indicated that reading specialists need to demonstrate leadership competencies in these three leadership areas before they are eligible for

certification: (a) resource to classroom teachers, administrators, and parents; (b) staff development; and (c) literacy program development and coordination.

All respondents indicated that reading specialists should serve as leaders with the curriculum, help build home-school connections, and communicate information about the reading program to various stakeholders. This finding about the importance of the leadership role is consistent with the IRA's position on the role of the reading specialist (International Reading Association, 2004b). Respondents also indicated that the three areas of the reading specialist's leadership role are equally important, and they believe that reading specialists should be prepared to focus on helping teachers become more knowledgeable about the teaching of reading by assisting them with ideas, strategies, and materials; modeling strategies and techniques; and providing professional development workshops (Quatroche & Wepner, 2008).

### **Purpose and Procedures of the Current Study**

As a follow-up to the survey, we returned to 16 respondents who said that they teach a course related to literacy leadership within their master's degree in reading program to gather additional information about the content of the course. We found that 11 of the 16 respondents were willing and able to respond to the questions by telephone. We posed 10 questions to find out about the specific course(s), the position of the course(s) in the program, the qualifications of those teaching the course(s), requirements for the course(s), the status of their program with meeting IRA/NCATE 2003 standards for reading specialists, perceived benefits for students, and recommendations. We reviewed the information gathered from all 11 interviews and used this information to develop seven categories. We then went back to the interviews to include specific information within each category.

### **Findings from the Telephone Interviews**

Table 1 presents the results of the telephone interviews. With the exception of two of the programs, all leadership courses occur at the end of the program. One program has a leadership course in the beginning and the middle, and one program has such a course integrated throughout the program. Course titles vary greatly and the majority of courses have key words such as administration, supervision, and leader; four have the word practicum in the title.

**Table 1.** Responses About Leadership Experiences in Master's Degree in Reading Programs

Univ.	Location of Course(s) in Program	Name of Course(s)	Student Requirements	Experience of Instructor	Meets IRA Standards?	Location of Experience	Perceived Benefits	Recommendations
1	End	Experience in Literacy Supervision	Observe graduate students teaching children at university reading clinic and give feedback to graduate students  Coach graduate students on conducting parent-teacher conference	Former K-12 Reading Specialist and School Administrator	Yes	Campus Clinic or Local Schools	Gives candidates opportunity to interact with teachers and parents, and work collaboratively with other professionals to help them with teaching methods	Two semesters of practicum instead of one semester
2	End	Developing Leaders in Literacy  Practicum II: Leadership in Literacy	Do observations  Complete portfolio to document leadership experiences, based on IRA standards  Make a presentation to teachers	Currently Reading Specialist and Coach	Yes	Local Schools	Helps assess students in a practical setting	Work with educational leadership faculty, current reading coaches, and administrators to determine relevant leadership needs
3	End	Supervision and Administration of Literacy Program  Literacy Curriculum Development and Implementation	Prepare a portfolio that documents experiences related to the IRA standards	Former Literacy Coordinator and School Principal	Yes	Local Schools	Helps students achieve competence and confidence and implement reading and writing strategies in their schools	Convey requirements and expectations to students early and often so that they can prepare their school administrators for this requirement; help school administrators understand the benefits of leadership preparation for reading personnel
4	End	Practicum in Supervision	Non-specific tasks related to observations	Former Principal and Superintendent	Yes	Local Schools	Hands on, practical day-to-day problem-solving	Increase the number of practicum hours; faculty who teach the course should have their own practical experiences leading reading programs



Univ.	Location of Course(s) in Program	Name of Course(s)	Student Requirements	Experience of Instructor	Meets IRA Standards?	Location of Experience	Perceived Benefits	Recommendations
5	End	Teaching Reading in Classroom of Diversity  Diagnosis and Practicum  Role of the Reading Teacher  Second Practicum (Each course has a coaching component)	Plan units for teachers to teach  Put together a booklet and present RTI information that teachers can use  Select hot topic from IRA standards that relates to their district to develop a staff development program  Conduct needs assessment to determine a specific school's needs for the selected hot topic  Develop and deliver staff development program to teachers in a school on the hot topic, based on the results of the needs assessment  Complete a coaching experience	Former Reading Teacher and English/Language Arts Department Coordinator  Adjuncts are Certified Literacy Teachers	Yes	Local Schools	Makes students stronger in understanding the importance of literacy and the potential that reading teachers can provide	Enhance the case study report; make a lot of contacts with schools in the areas
6	End	Administration and Supervision of Reading Programs	Interview three school leaders and develop a report  Create a professional development program and a poster session on a piece of the professional development program	Former Reading Specialist	Yes	Local schools	Students have a better picture of the actual role of the reading specialist	If the course is online, make sure that there is sufficient face-to-face contact with the students to support their learning
7	End	Practicum in Reading (only for Literacy Coaches)	Refine and strengthen school-based plans and activities  Survey paraprofessionals, teachers, counselors, and administrators  Write and submit a literacy grant based on school needs  Write a reading/language arts program based on school needs  Observe, conference, and coach teachers	Former Reading Specialist	Yes	Local Schools	Helps them to understand the roles and responsibilities of actually being a literacy specialist; gives them the opportunity to collaborate with classroom teachers and receive feedback about their interactions	Make it as hands on as possible

Univ.	Location of Course(s) in Program	Name of Course(s)	Student Requirements	Experience of Instructor	Meets IRA Standards?	Location of Experience	Perceived Benefits	Recommendations
8	End	Organization and Supervision of Reading Program Development	Set up a literacy program, based on need of a public or private school setting. Conduct training, follow-up, and evaluations	Former Reading Specialist	Yes	Local Schools	Builds students' confidence, knowledge, and expertise by working in a real setting	Keep it hands on in a practical setting and incorporate current research
9	Beginning and Middle	Leadership for School Improvement	Log leadership experiences, and reflect on them; two hours per week	Former Principal, Assistant Principal, and Teacher Program Coordinator	Yes	Local Schools	Students begin to realize their potential as teacher leaders and literacy specialists; students apply their theoretical knowledge to real-world situations, which enables them to reflect on their leadership practices	Require field experiences as part of a course
10	Integrated throughout program	Organizing and Supervising the Literacy Program	Create a teacher-friendly handbook of best practices to be used a resource for teachers  Conduct a professional workshop for grade-level colleagues  Coach teachers. Document and reflect on coaching experiences	Former Reading Specialist and Literacy Coach	Yes	Local Schools	Students realize that they can make a school-wide impact on literacy instruction; students understand the importance of effective communication skills	Permit students to experience the role of coaches as educational leaders to build professional learning communities
11	End	Administration and Supervision of Literacy Programs  Internship in Reading Supervision  Analysis, Interpretation and Dissemination of Literacy Assessment	Complete program evaluation, school literacy profession, and conduct a staff development program	Former Teacher and Assistant Principal	Yes	Local schools	Helps students gain confidence and build leadership skills in developing plans and making programmatic changes	Recruit more principal involvement; develop positive relationships with teachers and administrators; collaborate with the schools

Student requirements are as varied as the course titles as they are required to work directly with K-12 personnel, develop instructional plans, and develop different types of documentation, as follows:

1. Observe classroom teaching of reading.
2. Observe other graduate students and give feedback.
3. Coach teachers.
4. Make presentations to classroom teachers.
5. Serve as a coach on conducting a parent teacher conference.
6. Interview school leaders.
7. Plan teaching units for other teachers.
8. Write a reading/language arts program.
9. Strengthen school-based plans.
10. Develop a staff development program.
11. Conduct a needs assessment.
12. Participate in a poster session.
13. Conduct a survey.
14. Write and submit a grant.
15. Develop a best-practice handbook.
16. Conduct a program evaluation.
17. Complete portfolio to document experiences.

All faculty responsible for teaching the courses have had leadership experiences in the schools as literacy specialists or school administrators. Seven are former reading specialists and four are former principals. With the exception of one program, all faculty who teach these courses are employed full-time and all of the programs meet the IRA standards required for NCATE. All faculty use local schools; only one indicated that some of the experiences are at the campus clinic.

Faculty who taught the leadership courses and practicum stated that these experiences for reading specialist candidates give candidates the opportunity to (a) interact with teachers and parents; (b) work collaboratively with other professionals; (c) build leadership skills in developing plans and making programmatic changes; (d) increase confidence, knowledge, and expertise by working in a real setting; (e) have a hands-on experience in implementing reading and writing strategies in the schools; (f) understand the importance and impact of the reading specialist and the actual roles and responsibilities; (g) reflect on feedback from others about their

leadership skills and interactions; and (h) understand the importance of effective communication skills. Faculty commented that these leadership experiences helped them to assess candidates in a practical setting.

Faculty made the following recommendations to improve their own programs or other reading specialist programs:

1. Increase the amount of practicum time by adding another semester or increasing the number of hours within a semester.
2. Work with educational leadership faculty, current reading coaches, and administrators to determine leadership needs of literacy specialists.
3. Work with local schools so that administrators are willing to host and mentor reading specialist candidates.
4. Ensure that faculty responsible for practicum have their own experiences leading a reading program.
5. Ensure that candidates have sufficient hands-on experiences.

## **Discussion and Implications**

The 11 faculty who responded to our interview questions indicated that they believe their leadership courses provide experiences to prepare their candidates for the leadership component of the role of reading specialist. Programs include the observation of teaching with follow-up feedback or coaching, and require that candidates have the experience of providing professional development to teachers. This could be based on a needs assessment or a “hot topic” in literacy. Most programs also require students to document their experiences in some form, e.g., a portfolio, case study report, or poster presentation. Several other experiences include developing a best-practices handbook for teachers or writing and submitting a grant.

Overall, reading specialist candidates are required to work with teachers in a real setting to learn how to collaborate with other professionals to develop a school’s literacy program. Those who teach these courses are also qualified to do so. The faculty believe that the real-world experiences help their candidates to develop their leadership skills as reading specialists because they are receiving feedback on their ability to work with teachers. Faculty also recognize that candidates need even more time in the schools working with teachers and administrators and think that

more work needs to be done in helping local schools to understand the importance of this experience for reading specialist candidates.

The interviews indicate that there are programs that are making a concerted effort to prepare reading specialists as leaders. Reading specialist candidates are working with teachers to assist them in providing instruction and they are providing professional development to teachers to help improve practice. As reading specialist candidates work with teachers, they are required to reflect on their own practices so that they can learn how to best serve as coaches. All 11 programs meet IRA standards, which means that they are providing opportunities for reading specialist candidates to plan instruction, assist teachers, and provide literate environments. In addition, their candidates provide professional development to classroom teachers and reflect on their effectiveness as collaborators and communicators.

Although we interviewed only approximately 10 percent of the respondents from the original survey, we believe that the number of programs requiring a leadership component is beginning to increase. One of us who serves as an IRA/NCATE reviewer for reading specialist programs is finding that many programs are beginning to meet this standard because the leadership component is being integrated into coursework. Consequently, we believe that changes in the curriculum for reading specialists are beginning to catch up with the most recent standards.

It is encouraging to discover that master's degrees/certification programs do include a leadership course or a leadership component that meets IRA standards. This leadership course or component helps reading specialists more effectively aid teachers to use classroom assessments reliably to determine students' needs and plan instruction accordingly (International Reading Association, 2004b). It also appears that reading specialist candidates are learning how to provide professional development for teachers, mentor and coach teachers, and develop curriculum. This course or component is taking place in schools so that reading specialist candidates are learning how to work with classroom teachers, students, principals, reading specialists, and communities.

These programs are providing supervised experiences that allow reading specialist candidates to work with different types of professional development models and reflect on their own style of leadership. Part of this experience includes preparation in observing and modeling in classrooms and providing feedback to teachers (International Reading Association, 2004b). Literacy faculty are using observations and portfolios to determine reading specialist candidates' competencies. From the 11 faculty we interviewed, we also discovered that they are knowledgeable about the

leadership role through their own practice in K-12 education and scholarly pursuits. Although some progress has been made in working with school administrators to help them understand the importance of such a leadership experience, more creative work with principals needs to take place. For example, principals might consider providing release time for reading specialist candidates from their own classrooms to give them opportunities to work with and assist other classroom teachers in their own schools or others within the district. Reading specialist exchange programs with other districts can also offer new insights about instruction and assessment for the candidates themselves, the classroom teachers with whom they work, the building-level administrators, and the districts.

As more programs help reading specialists become leaders of literacy, schools will be more inclined to employ reading specialist graduates, as opposed to others who may not be prepared with a literacy background to assume a leadership role. In other words, our graduate programs need to prepare reading specialists with the knowledge, support, and practical experiences for serving as a leader so that they are the ones chosen to be the literacy leaders in their schools.

Although we as a profession do not have the authority to mandate that state departments of education require a course in leadership for reading specialists, we can and are using our own standards through IRA to help with this effort. As IRA continues its work with specific master's/certification programs to help faculty and administrators subscribe to the standards for reading specialists, research should continue to be conducted on exemplary models and conditions for cultivating the leadership role. Professional organizations such as the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) can provide opportunities for their membership to work with their professional development schools and other partnership schools to collect and disseminate data about the connection between leadership with literacy and student achievement. Profiles of these reading specialists and the work they are doing with teachers can help colleges and universities understand what a leader of a literacy program should look like in order to frame the graduate curriculum and assessment outcomes.

As faculty and administrators prepare for program reviews, they can use the findings from these interviews to help them revamp their coursework. The more information that we share about college and university initiatives in preparing reading specialist candidates for the leadership role, the more likely our chances are for seeing changes to the curriculum that will truly prepare reading specialist candidates to assume leadership roles in the schools.

We do not want to return to a period in time when reading specialists were confined to roles as remedial reading teachers. We now know that the work of reading specialists with teachers is important for moving a school's literacy program forward (Bean et al., 2003), and we must use our intellectual capital to develop graduate programs that prepare them accordingly.

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### About the Authors

Shelley B. Wepner is Professor and Dean of the School of Education at Manhattanville College, Purchase, NY. Co-editor of *The Administration and Supervision of Reading Programs, 4th edition* (2008), and *Leading Collaboratively, Partnering Successfully, PreK-16* (2011) (both Teachers College Press), she has 130 publications. She was a K-8 reading specialist and curriculum supervisor.

Diana Quatroche is Professor and Chair of Elementary, Early, and Special Education at Indiana State University where she teaches graduate courses in literacy. She is co-author of *Becoming a Professional Reading Teacher* (Brookes, 2008) along with additional publications in literacy. She has supervised school reading programs and Title I programs.

